

The Mediating Role of Learning Motivation in the Relationship between the IALS Module and Speaking Performance among Chinese EFL Undergraduates: A Proposal

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Abstract

Chinese EFL undergraduates encounter significant obstacles in acquiring spoken English. This challenge is partially attributed to affective factors, notably learning motivation, which holds a crucial role in the language learning process. Regrettably, Chinese undergraduates often exhibit a dearth of motivation in developing their speaking abilities, as speaking skills are typically marginalized within the national assessment. Autonomous learning and incentive strategies as two vital factors influencing students' learning motivation and speaking performance, are integrated to form the Incentive Autonomous Learning Strategies (IALS) Module. Based on the literature review, studies exploring the interrelationship among the IALS module, learning motivation, and speaking performance remain scarce. Consequently, this paper attempts to conceptualize the association between the IALS module and students' speaking performance, mediated by learning motivation at a public university in China. Adopting a quantitative approach, this study utilizes a correlation research design with a purposive sampling, where 42 participants are administered a learning motivation questionnaire (mediator), an incentive strategies questionnaire (independent variable), and given a speaking test (dependent variable), while linear regression is deployed to analyze their relationships. It is hoped that the study may contribute valuable insights into the interplay of the developed module, learning motivation, and speaking competence.

Keywords: Chinese EFL Undergraduates, Learning Motivation, Mediating Role, Speaking Performance, the IALS Module

Introduction

Improving undergraduates' EFL speaking proficiency remains an intricate and multifaceted challenge within the domain of college English education in China. Within tertiary education institutions, a common phenomenon known as "mute English" poses a significant obstacle that proves challenging to address (Peng, 2016). Nunan (2007) advocated autonomous learning as an effective strategy to enhance English-speaking competence, while Krashen (1982) asserted the profound impact of affective factors, such as learning motivation on language acquisition. Nevertheless, empirical evidence indicates a deficiency in motivation among EFL undergraduates in China, particularly in speaking acquisition (Tang, 2016). Linguists and psychologists have both confirmed a strong link between learning motivation and learner autonomy (Gao, 2010; Li, 2010; Qin, 2017; Reinders, 2020). A positive association between learner autonomy and learning motivation is perceived in the EFL learning process (Jia, 2018). Furthermore, Ustunloughlu (2017) asserts that autonomous learning can provide students with freedom and independence to address various learning needs. In light of the relative analysis above, it is definitely significant to identify the influence of the IALS module on both EFL speaking and learning motivation, which remains unexplored in existing literature. Accordingly, this research intends to make a correlation design to conceptualize both the direct influence of the IALS module on speaking performance and the indirect impact on it by the mediator of learning motivation.

Research Objectives

Drawing upon the theoretical basis provided by the scholars and the research gap identified in the existing research, the research objective in the current study is to conceptualize the mediating role of learning motivation in the relationship between the IALS module and speaking performance among Chinese EFL undergraduates at a public university in China.

Literature Review

This section provides an overview of EFL speaking, learning motivation, autonomous learning, incentive strategies, and the IALS module, and delves into the conceptual framework of the current study.

EFL speaking in China

As a fundamental aspect of language acquisition, speaking involves the construction of organized verbal discourse to convey thoughts and emotions (AlSaqqaf et al., 2024). It constitutes a fundamental component in the EFL learning process and determines a learner's EFL proficiency to some extent (Kahng, 2020; Nhi Nguyen & AlSaqqaf, 2023). Notably, China's Ministry of Education promulgated College English Course Teaching Requirements (trial) in 2023, which underscored the imperative for college English education to prioritize the cultivation of students' comprehensive mastery of English, particularly competence in listening and speaking skills.

It is believed that the complexity of speaking skills poses a greater challenge for EFL learners to acquire than other skills such as reading, listening, and writing (Ockey, 2009; Pekarek, 2015; Peng, 2016; Ke & AlSaqqaf, 2023). Effective EFL speaking is a sophisticated procedure, as it involves language reception, language processing, and language output, thus it requires a high level of language proficiency. Additionally, EFL learners habitually assess

their achievements in EFL acquisition based on the progress made in speaking activities or interactions (Jeon et al., 2022). Consequently, such speaking proficiency sharply influences learner's interpersonal communication and academic performance (Young, 2011; Van, 2018).

EFL educators and scholars from various areas continuously underline the importance of prioritizing EFL-speaking teaching in English courses (Qureshi, 2007; Fauzan, 2016; Lin, 2022). In China, the minimum attention is laid on EFL speaking training and teaching compared with other language skills, primarily attributed to the absence of a conducive environment to speak English as English is regarded as a foreign language along with the exclusion of speaking tests in formal examinations (Gao, 2010). Students who bear no external pressure themselves frequently lack intrinsic motivation to engage in English-speaking activities, compounded by the dearth of officious learning approaches and instructional guidance from instructors. Consequently, these factors contribute to the ignorance of speaking instruction and the low level of EFL undergraduates' speaking performance in China (Deng & Dell, 2023).

EFL undergraduates' speaking competence may be affected by several factors, such as learning motivation Dörnyei (2001a), learning approach Holec & Little (2007), and instructional strategies Zhang (2022); Gan (2020); Wang (2022), all of which are illustrated in the following sections.

Learning Motivation

Motivation is a psychological and emotional concept that involves the mechanisms which start, direct, and maintain goal-focused actions Ushioda (2016), which is essential in facilitating the formulation of strategies aimed at promoting and sustaining desired behaviors and outcomes. Learning motivation, as an indispensable component of affective parts, is positively related to students' academic performance in the process of EFL acquisition (Krashen, 1982). Some research indicated that students with strong and positive motivation inclines to have a much better engagement and performance in language learning (Al-Saqqaf, 2015; Wang, 2023). Thus, it is vitally valuable to play the role of learning motivation in prompting learners' effective language learning. In the current research, learning motivation assumes a crucial role in connecting the developed IALS module and Chinese undergraduates' EFL speaking. It is posited that a tight correlation exists between learning motivation and the autonomous learning model (Ushioda, 2016). Detailed exposition regarding autonomous learning is presented in the ensuing section.

Autonomous Learning

Autonomous learning denotes the capability to assume responsibility for one's learning process (Holec & Little, 2007). This study asserts that autonomous learning represents a distinct pedagogical approach, where students engage in independent learning under the guidance of educators, employing preferred methods and tactics to pursue and achieve predetermined learning objectives through personal endeavor, exploration, and inquiry.

Drawing upon the insights of Nunan (2007); Jia (2018), autonomous learning emerges as a potent method for fostering and nurturing learners' intrinsic learning motivation and enthusiasm. Unlike other facets within the domain of English studies, speaking proficiency represents a notably intricate skill that necessitates tailored approaches accommodating

individual variances and requirements (Jia, 2018). Consequently, autonomous learning undertaken by learners individually may address their diverse speaking requisites and proficiency levels effectively.

Moreover, the incentive strategies delineated by Zhang (2022); Gan (2020); Wan (2022) are employed to melt with autonomous learning to facilitate the cultivation of learners' speaking motivation and enhance their speaking proficiency.

Incentive Strategies

The utilized incentive strategies in the current research are adapted from the theories of Zhang (2022); Gan (2020); Wang (2022) encompassing five key perspectives: interest, participation, goal, confidence, and emotion incentive strategies. These strategies play a stimulating role during the entirety of English instruction. During the pre-learning phase, thematic videos corresponding to each unit are prepared to engage students with interest and participation incentive strategies. In class activities, students conduct autonomous learning to accomplish various designed tasks and achieve the learning objectives by deploying participation, goal, confidence, and emotion incentive strategies. Similarly, during after-class tasks, these incentive strategies are utilized to sustain learning motivation. In this study, the researcher employs these incentive strategies to invigorate students' learning motivation within the framework of autonomous learning. The cultivation of such motivation is posited to establish a fundamental groundwork for subsequent effective learning endeavors.

The IALS module

The IALS module is constructed by integrating incentive strategies and autonomous learning as the theoretical basis, where students' learning motivation and EFL speaking are both addressed. In the current study, the effectiveness of the IALS module is manifested by Chinese EFL undergraduates' responses and acceptance of the incentive strategies through the Incentive Strategies Questionnaire.

The Relationship among Variables Involved in This Research: A Conceptual Framework

Based on the literature review, a close interplay among the four variables (incentive strategies, autonomous learning, learning motivation, and speaking performance) is indicated in the study. Specifically, students' learning motivation as one of the affective factors, exerts influences on students' academic achievement (Krashen, 1982); on the other hand, the positive correlation between learning motivation and autonomous learning is confirmed (Nunan, 2007; Jia 2018), additionally, incentive strategies as one of the instructional strategies are intertwined with learning motivation as well as students' academic attainment (Zhang, 2022).

As stated in the previous section, the core theory of the IALS module lies in incentive strategies and autonomous learning, their link with learning motivation and academic performance is corroborated above (Krashen, 1982; Jia, 2018; Zhang, 2022). Thus, the IALS module has a close relationship with learning motivation and academic performance, while learning motivation also impacts academic performance significantly. Accordingly, learning motivation functions as a bridge connecting the IALS module and speaking performance. Based on Baron and Kenny's (1986) definition of a mediator, if the influence of an

independent variable X on the dependent variable Y is transmitted through the variable M, then M is the mediator, in alignment with the above analysis of the variables, learning motivation is determined as mediator in the correlation between the independent variable (IALS module) and the dependent variable (speaking performance) in the current study. Based on this correlational analysis, the conceptual framework is proposed in the following Figure 1.

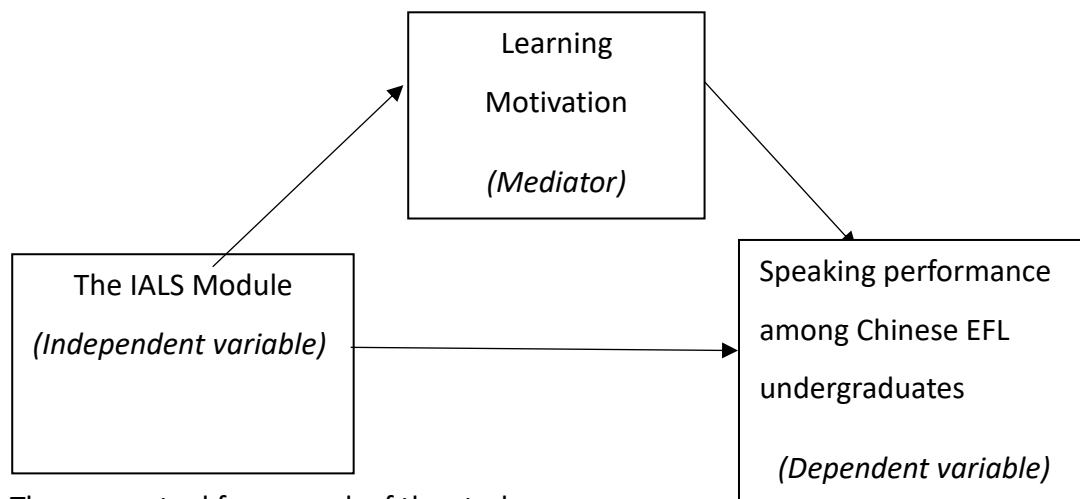


Figure 1. The conceptual framework of the study

Research Methodology

Utilizing a quantitative approach, a correlation research design is adopted to collect and analyze the data obtained from a public university in China. The sections below illustrate the research samples, research instruments, and data collection procedure sequentially.

Participants

By employing a purposive sampling technique in the current study AlSaqqaf et al (2023); Joannes & AlSaqqaf (2023), a sample of 42 Chinese EFL undergraduates majoring in applied psychology from the faculty of Teachers’ Education at Baoding University in China are selected as the research participants. The background information of the research sample is presented in Table 1 below.

Table 1
Sample of the Study (EFL Undergraduates)

Research Sample	Male	Female	Students’ Age
Class of Applied Psychology (N=42)	6 14.3%	36 85.7%	17-22 100%

Research Instruments and Data Collection

In line with the research objective of this study, three types of data are required to be obtained through the Learning Motivation Questionnaire constructed by Glynn in 2009, the Incentive Strategies Questionnaire developed by Pintrich (2007); She and Fisher (2000), and the speaking test, towards the research participants at a local university in China.

Linear regression is deployed to ascertain the potential mediating influence of learning motivation in the correlation between the IALS module and students' speaking performance. Simple linear regression aims to investigate the association between one singular independent variable and one dependent variable Hair et al (2010), while multiple linear regression intends to explore the interplay between several independent variables and one singular dependent variable, manifesting the ideal linear amalgamation of the IALS module and learning motivation for predicting students' speaking performance (Field, 2009; Hair et al., 2010). What's more, the mediating effect is examined consistent with the four-step methods proposed by (Baron and Kenny, 1986).

Research Validity

Validity refers to the degree to which a concept is appropriately evaluated within a study Korb (2012), which encompasses two primary classifications: content validity and face validity.

Face Validity

Face validity pertains to the suitability, rationality, or relevance of a test and its items as perceived by individuals responding to the test (Holden, 2010). To determine the face validity of the research instruments, a sample of five EFL undergraduates majoring in math who share a similar EFL learning environment as the real research participants, are randomly selected as the respondents. They are required to identify the layout of the questionnaire and the clarity of the language used. Subsequent revisions are made based on the feedback provided by the respondents.

Content Validity

Content validity refers to the degree to which a research instrument precisely captures all dimensions of a given construct (Korb, 2012). To assess the content validity of the Learning Motivation Questionnaire, Incentive Strategies Questionnaire, and speaking test, a panel of three experts, as well as TESL PhD holders are convened for evaluation and appraisal. Two Malaysian experts specializing in linguistics are enlisted to assess the appropriateness, coherence, and consistency of the questionnaires, while the Chinese expert possessing extensive pedagogical experience evaluates the logicality and practicability of the test. Subsequent refinement and adjustment of the questionnaires and tests are guided by the comments and feedback provided by the experts.

Conclusion

Under a quantitative research approach, this study works out a correlation research design to explore the associations between the IALS module and students' speaking performance, mediated by learning motivation. It is an ambitious attempt through conceptualizing the links among the above-mentioned variables, which could be a new area in the speaking instruction in China. It is hoped that this research could contribute to increasing educators' awareness about the crucial roles of the teaching speaking module in improving undergraduates' speaking skills by the cultivation of learning motivation among the target population.

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