

The Relationship Between Iranian EFL Learners' Motivation and Their English Proficiency Level

Maryam Jannati*

M.A. in TEFL

Department of Foreign Languages
Shiraz Branch, Islamic Azad University
Shiraz, Iran

Amin Marzban

Assistant Professor

Department of Foreign Languages
Shiraz Branch, Islamic Azad University
Shiraz, Iran

Abstract. The present study aimed to explore the relationship between motivation in learning and English proficiency level in a sample of 100 Iranian EFL intermediate learners. The instruments used to collect the data included Gardner's (2004) Attitude/Motivation Test Battery (AMTB) and a shortened version of a paper-based TOEFL test. The collected data were codified and entered into SPSS Software (Version 19) and were analyzed using descriptive statistics, t-test, and Pearson correlation coefficient. The results suggested that the highly motivated language learners in this study scored slightly higher on the English proficiency test than did the lower motivated participants and there was a positive significant relationship between the participants' motivation and their English proficiency. It was noted that the female participants were slightly more motivated to learn English as compared to the male peers. However, there was no significant difference found between the motivation level of male and female participants in the present study. In sum, the findings indicated that there was no significant difference between the male and female participants concerning their motivation in English learning and their proficiency level, suggesting that gender did not act as a determining moderator in the relationship of the two main variables of the study. The results would contribute to methodology and syllabus design in particular.

Keywords: Iranian EFL learners, motivation, english proficiency level.

Received: September 2014; Accepted: November 2014

*Corresponding author

1. Introduction

Merriam Webster Dictionary defines motivation as “a: the act or process of motivating, b: the condition of being motivated and c: a motivating force, stimulus, or influence” (p. 810). Harmer (2007, p. 98) defines motivation as “the dynamically changing cumulative arousal or internal drive in a person that initiates, directs, coordinates, amplifies, terminates, and evaluates the cognitive and motor processes”. Through this drive, initial wishes and desires are selected, prioritized, operationalized, and successfully or unsuccessfully acted out.

Motivation has also been defined as “some kind of internal drive which pushes someone to do things in order to achieve something” (Harmer, 2001, p. 51). As stated by Brown (1994, p. 152), motivation is a term used to define the success or the failure of any difficult task. Steers and Porter (1991, p. 6) considers three factors in a discussion of motivation:

- What energizes human behavior;
- What directs or channels such behavior, and
- how this behavior is maintained or sustained.

Motivation is thought to be responsible for “why people decide to do something, how long they are willing to sustain the activity, and how hard they are going to pursue it (Dörnyei, 2001, p. 8). Ryan and Deci (2000a, p. 54) state that “to be motivated means to be moved to do something”. Unlike unmotivated people who lose impetus and inspiration to act, motivated people are energized and activated to the end of a task. “Interest, curiosity, or a desire to achieve” (Williams and Burden, 1997, p. 111) are the main factors that compose motivated people. However, they argue that arousing interest is not enough to be motivated but the interest should be maintained. Furthermore, time and energy should be invested, and the effect which is required needs to be maintained so as to achieve a desired goal. According to Steers and Porter (1991, p. 6), motivation can be characterized as follows: “needs or expectations, behavior, goals, and some form of feedback”.

Trang and Baldauf (2007) observed that several factors may influence Vietnamese students' motivational level. One of these important factors was gaining good marks. In fact, two third of students considered gaining good marks as an important factor for improving their motivation. Another motivating factor for students was the fulfillment of teacher expectations. Moreover, the feedback provided by their teachers about the work affects their motivation. In other words, students were more motivated if their teachers check their work and provide explicit feedback about their weakness and strengths. Moreover, teaching techniques were found as another important factor influencing students to be motivated for learning. Topics especially those related to the student daily life were seen as another motivational source. Last but not least was students' linguistic need that may affect their motivation to study more.

According to Gardner (2010), motivation is a construct that is hard to define, but he identifies characteristics that motivated individuals express. Gardner believes that motivated individuals express effort in achieving one's goals, show persistence, attend to the tasks necessary to achieve the goals, have a strong willingness to attain their goals, enjoy the activities necessary to achieve such goals, are aroused in pursuing their goals, and have expectancies about their successes or failures. He suggested that when these individuals are achieving some degree of success, they show self-efficacy, and they are more self-confident about their achievements. They have reasons for their behavior which are often called motives.

1.1. Motivation and language learning

According to Oxford and Shearin (1996), foreign/second language motivation is active and personal involvement in foreign or second language learning. They suggest that as unmotivated students are insufficiently involved, they are unable to develop their language skills to the full potential. Besides, Gardner and Lambert (1959) maintained that motivation is of the instrumental or integrative nature. Integrative motivation is seen as the desire to communicate and become similar to members of the L2 community. On the other hand, instrumental motivation is

known as the desire to learn the L2 for pragmatic gains such as getting a better job. They also found that those students who were integratively motivated benefited more from practice opportunities, provided more answers in the classroom voluntarily, were more precise in responses, and were generally more successful language learners.

The importance of motivation in enhancing second/foreign language learning is, too, undeniable. Lifrieri (2005, p. 4) pointed out that “when asked about the factors which influence individual levels of success in any activity-such as language learning-most people would certainly mention motivation among them”. According to Brown (2000), language learners with the proper motivation would be successful in learning a second language. Similarly, Gardner (2006, p. 241) stated that “students with higher levels of motivation would do better than students with lower levels”. He also believed that if a person was motivated, he/she had reasons for engaging in the relevant activities, made more effort, persisted in the activities, focused on the tasks, showed desire to achieve the goal, and enjoyed the activities.

The results of empirical studies pointed to benefits of motivation in language learning contexts. Arani (2004) investigated language learning needs of EFL students at Kashan University of Medical Sciences to identify the students’ attitudes towards learning English as a school subject prior entering the university. The research sample consisted of 45 medical students who enrolled in the first and second year of study. To collect the data, different types of questionnaires were administered to the sample at the beginning, in the middle and at the end of the English for Medical Purposes (EMP) courses. The results showed that most of the participants had positive attitudes towards both learning English and the English language teacher.

Karahan (2007) conducted a study in the Turkish EFL context to examine the complaints raised by learners, teachers, administrators, and parents about why most of Turkish EFL students could not attain the desired level of proficiency in English and to find out the relation between language attitudes and language learning. The sample included 190 (94 females and 96 males) eighth grade students of a private primary school in Adana, Turkey, where English was intensively taught. The findings

indicated that although the students were exposed to English in a school environment more frequently than other students at public schools, they had only mildly positive attitudes; especially female students had higher rates. In addition, the students recognized the importance of the English language but interestingly did not reveal high level orientation towards learning the language. On the other hand, the results indicated that the participants had mildly positive attitudes towards the English based culture but they were not tolerant to Turkish people speaking English among themselves. Concerning gender differences, Dornyei (2003) showed that male students are less motivated L2 learners. Gambrell et al., (1996) found that girls were more positive in their ability, beliefs, and motivation about reading than boys. In an exploration carried on by Yashima, Zenuk-Nishide, and Shimizu (2004) on Japanese learners' motivation in English as an L2, the results showed that those with high motivation tended to communicate more in the classroom and to ask questions or talk to teachers more frequently outside the class.

In addition, Qashoa (2006) conducted a study among secondary school students in Dubai. The study aimed at examining the students' instrumental and integrative motivation for learning English and recognizing the factors affecting learners' motivation. Two instruments used to collect the data were questionnaire and interviews. The sample, for the questionnaire, consisted of 100 students. For the interviews, on the other hand, the sample included 20 students, 10 Arab English teachers and 3 supervisors. The results suggested that students had a higher degree of instrumentality than integrativeness. In addition, the findings indicated that difficulties with the subject (English) aspects such as vocabulary, structures and spelling were found to be the most demotivating factors for the students. Based on these findings, the present study has investigated the relationship between motivation to learn English and English proficiency level among Iranian EFL intermediate learners. In addition, the questions addressed in this piece of research are stated as follows:

1. Is there any relationship between Iranian EFL learners English proficiency and their motivation to learn English?

2. Does gender play a role in the relationship between motivation and language proficiency level of Iranian EFL learners?

2. Method

2.1. Participants

The participants in the study were 80 intermediate EFL learners (35 males and 45 females) aged 16 to 25 years. One problem with the participants was that some of them were at lower ages and the TOEFL could have been more challenging for them and this might have affected their performance on the English proficiency test. However, since they were selected from intact classes, this was unavoidable. The participants were studying English in language institutes in Shiraz and their native English was Persian.

2.2. Instruments

Gardner's (2004) Attitude/Motivation Test Battery (AMTB) was used to measure the participants' motivation to learn English. This questionnaire contained 26 items each with six responses: Strongly Disagree (SD), Moderately Disagree (MD), Slightly Disagree (SD), Slightly Agree (SA), Moderately Agree (MA), and Strongly Agree (SA).

A paper-based TOEFL test was also used to measure the participants' level of English proficiency. The test included three sections: English grammar and written expressions (20 items), Vocabulary (20 items), a Reading comprehension (10 items), all together consisting of 50 items. The data collected through these instruments were analyzed using descriptive statistics, t-test, and Pearson correlation test.

3. Results

This section presents the results of the study and provides a discussion of them. Tables are also presented to better clarify the results preceding the discussion section.

3.1. Participants' performance in the proficiency test

One of the variables in this study was the participants' English proficiency measured by a paper-based TOEFL test to see whether there is

any significant correlation between the participants' language proficiency and their motivation. Table 1 shows how the participants performed in the English proficiency test:

Table 1. Descriptive statistics for the participants' scores in the proficiency test

Proficiency	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Scores	80	10	42	24.25	6.944
Valid N (listwise)	80		50		

As the above table indicates, the total mean score of the participants in the English proficiency test is 24.25 out of 50 which shows that the participants had a relatively poor performance in the proficiency test. Besides, the minimum score is 10 and the maximum score is 42. Table 2 presents the mean scores of male and female participants in the English proficiency test.

Table 2. Male and female participants' scores in the proficiency test

Gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Sig.
Males	35	23.17	7.771	.223
Females	45	25.09	6.186	

As shown in Table 2, the mean score of the male participants in the proficiency test is 23.17 and that of the female participants is 25.09. Therefore, female participants scored higher than male participants in the

proficiency test. In other words, female participants had a better performance in the proficiency test than male participants did. However, as the value of significance level from the Independent Samples t-test in the last column indicates, there is no significant difference between male and females' performance in the proficiency test ($P > 0.05$). In other words, both male and female participants performed similarly in the proficiency test.

3.2. Relationship between the participants' language proficiency and their motivation

One of the issues of interest, here, is to find out how the participants with different levels of motivation performed on the English proficiency test. To this end, the participants were divided into three low-motivation, mid-motivation, and high-motivation groups as shown in Table 3. In this table, the participants whose motivation mean scores ranged from 67 to 80 were placed in the low-motivation group, the participants with a motivation mean score of 81 to 106 were put in the mid-motivation group, and the participants whose motivation mean score ranged from 107 to 127 were placed in the high-motivation group.

Table 3. Motivation groups

Groups	Motivation score range
Low-motivation	67-80
Mid-motivation	81-106
High-motivation	107-127

Table 4 exhibits the number and the percentage of the participants' in each motivational group.

Table 4. Participants' distribution in motivational groups

Groups	Frequency	Percent
Low-motivation	21	26.2%
Mid-motivation	46	57.5%
High-motivation	13	16.2%
Total	80	100.0

As can be seen in the above table, the percentages of the participants in low-motivation, mid-motivation, and high-motivation groups are 26.2%, 57.5%, and 16.2%, respectively. Accordingly, the majority of the participants were in the mid-motivation group. The low-motivation group occupied the second position while the lowest number of the participants was found in the high-motivation group. On the whole, about 84% of the participants had a low to middle level of motivation to learn English while only 16.2% were of high motivation to learn English.

Determining the relationship between the participants' language proficiency and their level of motivation was one of the aims of the present study. Table 5 shows the participants' English proficiency in the three motivational groups. As can be in this table, the mean score of the participants' English proficiency in the low-motivation group is 22.14, the mean score of the participants' English proficiency in the mid-motivation group is 24.07, and the mean score of the English proficiency in the high-motivation group is 28.31, respectively. Consequently, the high-motivation group had the highest level of English proficiency followed by the mid-motivation group and the low-motivation group.

Table 5. Participants' English proficiency in the motivational groups

Groups	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Low-motivation	21	22.14	6.159
Mid-motivation	46	24.07	7.464
High-motivation	13	28.31	4.423
Total	80	24.25	6.944

The above table suggests that the highly motivated participants scored slightly higher on the English proficiency test than did the low motivated participants. However, the main concern here is whether there is a relationship between the participants' English proficiency and their motivation to learn English or not. Table 6 shows the results of the Pearson correlation test concerning the relationship between the participants' language proficiency and their level of motivation to learn English:

Table 6. Correlation between motivation and english proficiency

		Proficiency	Motivation
Proficiency	Pearson Correlation	1	.307**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.006
N		80	80

As shown in the above table, the value of the correlation between the participants' motivation and their English proficiency is 0.307, so there is a slightly positive correlation between the two variables. Furthermore, the value of the significance level suggests that this correlation is significant ($P < 0.01$). Therefore, it can be concluded that there was a positive significant relationship between the participants' motivation and their English proficiency. In other words, the higher the motivation to learn English, the higher will be their English proficiency.

3.3. Gender differences concerning motivation and language proficiency relationship in iranian EFL learners

This section deals with differences between male and female participants' in terms of the relationship between motivation to learn English and English proficiency level. Table 7 shows the level of the male and female participants' motivation to learn English:

Table 7. Males' and females' motivation

Gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Sig.
Males	35	91.09	11.556	.071
Females	45	96.44	14.016	

As shown in the above table, the mean score of motivation for male participants is 91.09 and the mean score of motivation for female participants is 96.44. Accordingly, the female participants were slightly more motivated to learn English than the male participants were. However, as the results of the t-test in the last column shows there was no significant difference between the motivation level of male and female participants in this study ($P > 0.05$). Therefore, it can be said that both male and female participants were similarly motivated to learn English.

Table 8 shows the results of the Pearson correlation test concerning the relationship between the male and female participants' motivation to learn English and their English proficiency. As shown in the above table, the value of the correlation between the male participants' motivation and their English proficiency is 0.407. Accordingly, there was a positive correlation the male participants' motivation to learn English and their English proficiency. Furthermore, the values of the significance level suggest that there was a negative significant correlation between the male participants' motivation to learn English and their English proficiency ($P < 0.05$).

Table 8. Correlation between males' motivation and English proficiency

		Motivation	Proficiency
Males	Pearson Correlation	1	.407
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.015
	N	35	35
Females	Pearson Correlation	1	.204
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.179
	N	45	45

In addition, the value of the correlation between the female participants' motivation to learn English and their English proficiency is 0.204. Accordingly, there was a positive correlation between the female participants' motivation to learn English and their English proficiency. Additionally, the values of the significance level suggest that there was no significant relationship between the female participants' motivation to learn English and their English proficiency ($P > 0.05$).

4. Discussion of the Results

The findings of the study showed that those language learners with higher levels of motivation scored slightly higher on the English proficiency test than did the low-motivated participants. Besides, there was a positive significant relationship between the participants' motivation and their English proficiency level. This is consistent with the results of the previous studies (Arani, 2004; Brown, 2000; Gardner, 2006; & Lifrieri, 2005) which stated that language learners with the proper motivation will be successful in learning a second language. Similarly, Gardner (2006) argued that motivated individuals expressed effort in achieving their goals, showed persistence, and attended to the tasks necessary to achieve such goals. In an exploration carried on by Yashima, Zenuk-Nishide, and Shimizu (2004) on Japanese learners' motivation in English as an L2, the results showed that those with high motivation tended to communicate more in the classroom and to ask questions or talk to teachers more frequently outside the class.

Concerning the participants' level of motivation as shown above, it was noted that the female participants were slightly more motivated to learn English than the male participants, as confirmed by Karahan (2007). In addition, Dornyei (2003) showed that male students were less motivated L2 learners. Gambrell et al., (1996) found that girls were more positive in their ability, beliefs, and motivation about reading than boys. However, there was no significant difference between the motivation level of male and female participants in this study. On the whole, the findings indicate that there was no significant difference between the male and female participants concerning their motivation to learn English and their English proficiency, suggesting that gender did not play

a determining role in these two variables. Generally speaking, a mixed trend is observed when comparing the results of several studies carried out on the relationship between gender and motivation.

5. Conclusion

The results of this study showed that the highly motivated language learners scored slightly higher on the English proficiency test than did the low-motivated participants. Accordingly, there was a positive significant relationship between the participants' motivation and their English proficiency. It was also found that the female participants had slightly higher motivation in learning English than their male peers. Nevertheless, no significant difference was observed between the motivation level of male and female participants in this study. However, there was a significant relationship between the males' motivation to learn English and their English proficiency but not between the females' motivation to learn English and their English proficiency.

Therefore, in accordance with the findings of the present study, EFL teachers can motivate language learners by creating less anxiety-provoking situations. In addition, EFL teachers and practitioners are recommended to provide more help and assistance to less proficient language learners in order to increase their level of motivation in learning English. Syllabus designers and curriculum developers should also be urged to allocate extra hours of teaching to those learners with lower degrees of motivation.

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