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Motivation and strategies to learn English: the case of pre-service teachers of Chinese.

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Abstract

This paper reports a study of motivation and strategies toward learning English used by pre-service teachers of Chinese. The aims of the study were to investigate whether pre-service teachers of Chinese are unmotivated to learn English if they are not going to use English substantially in the future and to examine the learning strategies the participants adopt during English lessons. Gardner's (1985) Attitude/Motivation Test Battery was modified and administered to elicit pre-service teachers of Chinese language's motivational orientation to learn English, their preferences and needs to learn English as well as their learning strategies in learning English. Findings from this study pose significant implications to current educational reform in China and may help educators to identify appropriate strategies to facilitate the learning of a second language by non-English major teachers.

In Hong Kong, English is the most important foreign language for historical, political and economical reasons (Johnson, 1998; Pennycook, 1995) and it has been a compulsory subject in schools since the British colonial years. However, people in Hong Kong are more eager to learn Putonghau after the colonial years (Shanghai Daily, 2007) as predicted by Lord (1987), Kwo (1994) and Pierson (1994) long before the handover of sovereignty. With the implementation of “Biliterate and Trilingual” language education, 90% of Hong Kong secondary schools were to implement mother tongue education (using Cantonese to teach all subjects except language-based subjects) and Putonghau to teach Chinese as a sign of national integration and decolonialisation.

Thus whether pre-service teachers of Chinese are still eager to learn English or if a desire to learn Putonghua has replaced the necessity of English poses an interesting question for research. This study aims to investigate the motivation of pre-service teachers of Chinese to learn English post-colonially. These pre-service teachers are required to take an English foundation course, which aims to develop learner autonomy, academic writing skills and presentations skills in the first year of their training.

Literature review

The literature is useful in identifying two areas for investigating pre-service Chinese language teachers’ motivation to learn English. They include Chinese learners’ motivation to learn English and teacher motivation to learn a foreign language. However, the literature only provides a general direction for the present investigation for several reasons:

- 1) motivational patterns described in the literature were of a general group of Chinese learners or a group of teachers who were already bilingual, and may have different attitudes than the participants in this study.
- 2) Pre-service Chinese teachers’ English learning motivation hasn’t been explored in the literature previously.
- 3) All studies were conducted in 70-90s signifying that it is appropriate to revisit this issue.

One useful aspect of the literature investigates Chinese learners’ motivation from a macro perspective. According to Gardner and Lambert (1972), instrumental motivation concerns how the foreign language can be utilized as a useful instrument towards furthering other aims and goals, such as further study or improving job

prospects, while “integrative motivation” refers to a desire to learn a foreign language to communicate with the target language group and gain closer contact with them and understanding of their culture. Richards (1993), Lin and Detaramani (1998) believed Hong Kong students are instrumentally motivated. That is, learners are eager to obtain something practical or concrete from the study of a second language (Hudson, 2000). Lin and Detaramani (1998) explained that Hong Kong students learn English because it is required for entering university. Teachers and parents also emphasize the importance of public examinations. Fu (1974) conducted a survey investigating 561 secondary school students and found clear instrumental orientations. In the post-1997 years, Lai (1999) reexamined Hong Kong students’ motivation to learn English and reached the same conclusions. According to Fu (1987) and Walters and Balla (1992), there is a paradox: Hong Kong students seem very instrumentally motivated, but students are reluctant to engage in independent, self-directed learning. It was difficult to determine whether this reluctance stemmed from cultural constraints or as Walters and Balla (1992) suggested, a lack of integrative motivation.

Meanwhile, Biggs (1995) believed Chinese learners see learning in a practical way. He stated, “westerners have seen integrative motivation as the only way of defining what is meaningful and worthwhile...the Chinese learner may see things more pragmatically...the deep strategy may be activated by a head of mixed motivational steam: personal ambition, family face, peer support, material reward...and interest. Even more basic were those very Confucian internal dispositions that created a sense of diligence and receptiveness”. Biggs (1995) believed achievement enhances westerners egos, but what constituted success may be determined by other factors, e.g. family, group, or the society as a whole. Further, the pressure on Hong Kong students to study hard was notorious regardless of family. Chinese learners were likely to ascribe their performance to be due to controllable factors such as effort and study methods. Ability itself is perceived by Chinese teachers, parents and students as an attribute that can be modified through effort.

Different motives also influenced the learning strategies and language use patterns of senior secondary school students learning in Hong Kong (Richards, 1993). Findings suggested motivation played an important role in second language acquisition because of its close relationship to a number of factors which influence the learning process; i.e., attitudes, attributions, views about language learning, strategy choice and language use patterns. Students who were motivated mainly by a strong intrinsic interest in learning the language to be able to use it as a tool for communication had a greater preference for communication-based learning activities, used English more

frequently and in a greater variety of contexts than students who were motivated mainly by a desire to pass exams or enhance their career prospects.

The above studies only examined the English learning motivation of Hong Kong students in general but not pre-service Chinese teachers, whom this study aims to investigate. Besides, all the above studies were conducted in the 70s-90s and not much has been done in the past decade. Therefore, it will be meaningful to revisit this issue

Another useful aspect of the literature is teacher motivation to learn a foreign language. There have been studies looking into this area but they tend to focus on cognitive elements like efficacy (Ashton, Webb & Doda, 1983; Ashton, 1984; Gorrell and Capron, 1991) and causation (deCharms, 1968; Johnson, Baldwin and Wiley, 1969). The results of several studies looking into bilingual teacher motivation to learn a foreign language reveal two extremes (Laughlin, 1996; Valerio, 1997). Studies found teacher motivation to learn a foreign language is largely for the benefits of their students (Laughlin, 1996) and English language teacher motivation for acquisition of Spanish in the US is to make a difference and remedy oppressive conditions for Spanish-speaking students. Valerio (1997) revealed that for bilingual teachers, the decision to become teachers was influenced by positive role models they had as students.

A study conducted by Thicksten (1996), however, found that only one out of five teachers welcomed the opportunity to learn Spanish and teach in a bilingual classroom. The reasons for these disparities among the above studies are possibly because Laughlin (1996) and Valerio's (1997) studies were conducted with a group of teachers who were already bilingual and therefore had a positive image of bilingualism in general. However, Thicksten's work studied teachers who are monolingual. The results hence indicated they were less favorable toward learning a foreign language. On the other hand, the above studies were all conducted in the US and may not apply in the Hong Kong context. This paper intends to fill this gap and draw implications for language education.

Purpose of the study

Specifically, this paper aims to answer the following research questions:

Research question 1:

Are pre-service teachers of Chinese instrumentally motivated to learn English as repeatedly suggested by previous studies?

Research question 2:

How does the motivation to learn English of pre-service teachers of Chinese affect their strategies when learning English both inside and outside classrooms?

Methodology

Participants

70 pre-service teachers of Chinese from Hong Kong volunteered to participate in this study. They were aged between 19-20 and were required to enroll in a one year English foundation course by a teacher training institute in Hong Kong. They all had been learning English for more than 15 years and passed a public examination for English proficiency in secondary school. The participants at the teacher training institute all received a grade D or E in Use of English in their Hong Kong Advanced Level Examination, of which 60 percent of all candidates received Grade D or E while 20 percents received Grade A, B and C and 20 received a failing grade. According to their grade on the examination, this group of pre-service teachers of Chinese language only possessed an average level of English competency.

Instruments

For the purpose of the study, respondents were given a questionnaire to express their views on learning English and some participants were later interviewed by the researcher.

Questionnaire

The questionnaire was based on Gardner's (1985) Attitude/Motivation Test Battery. To conduct the survey, the researcher explained the purpose of the research to the participants before completing the questionnaire. Respondents were given the questionnaire during the lecture time for a module titled "Foundations in English". The questionnaire was worded in simple English to ensure respondents were able to understand it. Respondents were reminded that their participation was completely voluntary. Informed consent forms were distributed. Respondents were reminded that data collected would only be used for the sole purpose of the current study. Respondents were given 15 minutes to answer the questionnaire and the researcher also stayed in the classroom to answer any questions.

In the questionnaire there were 36 questions in total, divided into seven sections. The questionnaire employed a 6-point scale for participants to indicate their answers (6 strongly agree, 5 agree, 4 tend to agree, 3 tend to disagree, 2 disagree and 1 strongly disagree). The complete questionnaire is included in Appendix 1.

Interviews

Face to face semi-structured interviews were conducted after preliminary analysis of the questionnaire results . There were areas in the questionnaire results which required explanation, so the interviews filled this gap by providing further explanation and triangulation.

Ten pre-service teachers were randomly interviewed. Interviews were conducted in a counselling room in which a non-threatening environment could help respondents express their feelings about English learning. The researcher first thanked them for participating and explained the purpose of the interview and how it would be conducted. Respondents were reminded the interview would be recorded and their responses would remain confidential. The language of the interview was Cantonese--the language respondents felt most comfortable with.

Data analysis

Descriptive analyses were used to project motivation and learning strategies for English learning.

Statistical results

Table 1 summarizes the descriptive data. Variables include pre-service teacher preference, pre-service teacher needs, integrative motivation orientation, interest in English, instrumental motivation orientation, and English class anxiety and learning strategies.

A reliability test on the 36-item questionnaire was run to test for internal consistency of all the items. The reliability coefficient (Cronbach alphas) was high, which means the internal consistency of the 36 items in the questionnaire was high (see Table 1).

Table 1 *Summary Statistics and reliability estimation for the questionnaire (N=70)*

Variables	Subjects	Items	Mean	Std. Deviation	Cronbach Alpha (reliability)
V1: Pre-service teacher preference	70	4	5.11	0.822	0.788
V2: Pre-service teacher needs	70	3	4.33	0.924	0.826
V3: Attitudes toward	70	2	5.05	0.856	

English speaking people/Integrative motivation orientation					0.768
V4: Interest in English	70	2	5.52	0.838	0.788
V5: Instrumental motivation orientation					0.812
	70	2	5.09	0.972	
V6: English class anxiety	70	3	3.83	1.212	0.844
V7: Learning strategies					
<i>Eager and active</i>	70	8	3.89	0.786	0.747
<i>Passive</i>	70	12	3.39	0.868	0.792

Among the motivation variables analyzed (V1-V6), Chinese pre-service teacher interest is the most significant factor regarding motivation to learn English (M=5.52) and they also believe learning English is useful (V1 and V5) (M=5.11 and M=5.09). They have an integrative motivation orientation towards English (V4= 5.52). However, they do not see the need to use English as imminent (V2) (M=4.33). Results also show pre-service teachers are anxious when learning English in class (V6) (M=3.83). The learning strategies they employ are generally positive (V7).

Discussions

Preference and needs

Based on the means of the two categories “pre-service teacher preference” and “pre-service teacher needs”, one can see both categories exhibited high means (pre-service teacher preference M=5.09, pre-service teacher needs M=4.33). Pre-service teacher preference refers to the learning approach or style pre-service teachers of Chinese tend to adopt when learning a foreign language. Questionnaire results indicate pre-service teachers hold strong preferences toward English learning. Although they are pre-service teachers of Chinese, they do not have a negative attitude towards English and see it as important. One pre-service teacher indicated in an interview that English is an international language which all teachers of all languages should learn so as to broaden their world knowledge with respect to exchanging ideas on teaching and contributing to professional development.

Participants were also aware of the need to learn English even though they may not use English as much as Chinese in their careers. Learning needs refers to what pre-service teachers of Chinese would like to learn. They know English is important to their teacher

development. These results are similar to Richards (1993), Fu (1987) and Walter and Balla (1992) who also found Chinese learners in Hong Kong are instrumentally motivated. One participant confirmed this in an interview by saying, “I expect myself to have job promotion in the future, maybe become a school principal or work for the government. English is definitely a must to help my career advancement. If I want to speak on behalf of my school, English is a definite asset.”

Also, participants see English as an important part of learning because they have been encouraged to learn English from a very young age. Additionally, the importance of English learning is heavily stressed in Hong Kong and English seems to be an inevitable part of their education. One respondent in an interview said he “feel(s) strange to stop learning English”. Biggs (1995) also indicated that the learning strategies of Chinese learners may be activated by a head of motivational steam; personal ambition, family face, peer support ...and interest.

Motivation orientation

The means of “integrative motivation orientation”, “interest in English” and “instrumental orientation” are high. Conclusions suggested from the results indicate pre-service teachers of Chinese are motivated to learn English because of interest in English and its importance for their futures. One respondent in an interview replied, “I can’t say for sure what tomorrow will bring, maybe I will become a Chinese teacher, maybe I won’t. Who knows? I am sure improving English won’t do me any harm. Plus being proficient in both Chinese and English can be very impressive too.” This revealed that this teacher trainee considered being bilingual in an international city an advantage. Another respondent discussed his integrative motivation orientation to learn English in an interview, “Although I will be a Chinese teacher in the future, but I like the way English words sound. It is melodic unlike Cantonese”. Another participant also stated why he liked English in an interview, “I like English because I can make more friends and talk to net friends from different parts of the world. Only talking to local net friends in ICQ can be quite boring sometimes. English is the only means to know people across cultures.”

Based on the first two motivation variables’ statistical results and the interview results, new light has been shed on previous research (Fu 1987; Walters and Balla 1992; Biggs 1995; Lin and Detaramani 1998) which indicates pre-service teachers of Chinese have strong intrinsic motivation. This can be explained by the fact that after participants passed the public examination and English was no longer a worry, they were freed from

examination pressure. They could start to appreciate the English language for its own merits and intrinsic motivation was enhanced.

Learning strategies

According to the findings of the present study, participants employed different strategies inside and outside the classroom. Learning strategies refer to the techniques pre-service teachers employ when learning English. The following sections explain English learning strategies employed by pre-service teachers of Chinese inside and outside classrooms.

Inside the classroom

One of the statistical findings regarding English learning strategies is that class anxiety is a factor affecting pre-service Chinese language teachers' motivation toward learning English in class, with a mean of 3.73. The mean of the answer to the question of whether they would be embarrassed to volunteer answering a teacher question was 3.96. When participants were asked whether they felt nervous and confused when they were speaking in English, the mean was 3.89. The statistical results were rather neutral. A respondent commented in an interview, "All our other lectures are conducted in Chinese and we always communicate with our friends in Cantonese. How possibly could we not feel embarrassed to volunteer answering questions in English? Answering questions in Chinese is fine, we all feel comfortable with it...but not English." Face is also a hurdle for pre-service teachers of Chinese. This is echoed in the response to another question of which the mean was 4.06; "When I am in English class, I will only answer when my teacher asks me a question". Participants only answering questions when teachers asked is embedded in the learning culture in China. Giving answers without first raising your hand is considered to be impolite. Therefore, most participants were used to a learning culture where they only answer questions when asked.

When asking about participation in English classes, the statistical results showed no clear answer because the means of being passive and only answering easy questions were 3.65 and 3.20 respectively. Though the statistical results were not particularly clear, one respondent revealed his opinion in an interview, "Answering easy questions in class does not show how clever you are. It might project an impression to your classmates that you are flattering your teacher...only answering difficult questions impresses our friends. How can one say we don't contribute in class? We are only waiting for the right time and the right question to answer only."

Outside the classroom

According to the results of this research, participants care about their studies outside the classroom. Items like “After I get my English assignment back, I always review my mistakes and correct them as far as I can” had a high mean of 4.37; “When I have a problem understanding something we are learning in English class, I immediately ask the teacher for help” had a mean of 4.00 and “When it comes to English homework, I work very carefully, making sure I understand everything” had a mean of 4.20. These results indicate participants’ willingness to spend time outside the classroom reviewing lessons.

However, pre-service teachers’ strategies for dealing with assignments and problems from school work were complicated and no conclusion could be reached because the means were neutral. The means for participants seeking help just before the assignment due date was 3.51, while for the items “just forget about it when they come across any problems”; “just skim over their homework” and “When it comes to English homework, I put some effort into it, but not as much as I could” received means of 3.48, 3.37 and 3.44.

One item in the questionnaire asked participants whether they believed in luck and intelligence could bring them good results, and participants again gave a neutral response with a mean of 3.62. Therefore, it is hard to justify whether Chinese learners considered effort an important factor in their academic success. This echoes the results from previous studies (Salili and Hau, 1994; Lin and Detaramani 1998).

However, it was interesting that participants only paid attention to their academic performance. Anything unrelated to academic English wasn’t a common strategy for English learning. When participants were asked whether they tried learning English by watching TV, listening to pop songs or watching English movies without reading Chinese subtitles, participants responded differently. They prefer casually learning English through movies and TV but not songs or in a conscious way, like listening to the dialogues without reading the Chinese subtitles. The results signify the importance of enhancing English teaching by using language arts and a task-based approach to teaching and learning. Participants see English learning as important because it has been stressed extensively by the government, examination authority, parents and teachers.

Conclusion

This article presented findings concerning pre-service teachers of Chinese English

learning motivation and strategies. It was found that participants were motivated to learn English both instrumentally and integratively. They learnt English because it was useful for their future and to become acquainted with people across cultures. However, the current primary and secondary education curriculum is still largely exam oriented, which affects learner attitudes at the tertiary level. This exam-centered policy overlooks the importance of helping learners appreciate the beauty of language itself.

Results also found this group of pre-service teachers of Chinese was passive inside the classroom. They tended to pay less attention to authentic use of the target language, which draws implications to material design. More emphasis on authentic language use in the classroom might encourage learners to view it more positively. Classrooms are inherently an acquisition-poor language learning environment. Therefore materials should be as authentic as possible. For the benefits of the language learners, it is important to select authentic, suitable materials and reflect on the suitability of current classroom pedagogy.

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Appendix 1
Questionnaire for participants

Dear students,

As a pre-service Chinese Language teacher taking English language course, we would like to collect your views on learning English. Please use a pen / pencil to circle the number which best reflect your opinion on the following statement. We very much appreciate your time. Thank you.

		Strongly agree	agree	Tend to agree	Tend to disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Students' preference							
1	I want to take English course to improve my English proficiency.	6	5	4	3	2	1
2	Even if I were not required to take an English language course, I would still want to take one.	6	5	4	3	2	1
3	If I had a choice to take language course, I would still want to take an English course.	6	5	4	3	2	1
4	I think university students should still take an English language course.	6	5	4	3	2	1
Students' needs							
5	I can see the need of using English to give a presentation.	6	5	4	3	2	1
6	Whenever I write diary, I will try to write in English.	6	5	4	3	2	1
7	I can see the need to use English to write academic paper.	6	5	4	3	2	1

Attitudes toward English speaking people / Integrative orientation							
8	I would like to know more about English speaking people	6	5	4	3	2	1
9	The more I get to know the English speaking people, the more I want to be	6	5	4	3	2	1
Interest in English							
10	If I were visiting an English speaking country I would like to be able to speak fluent English	6	5	4	3	2	1
11	I often wish I could read and listen to English fluently.	6	5	4	3	2	1
Instrumental orientation							
12	Studying English can be important for me only because I will need it for my future career.	6	5	4	3	2	1
13	Studying English can make me become a more knowledgeable person.	6	5	4	3	2	1
English class anxiety							
14	It embarrassed me to volunteer answers in our English class.	6	5	4	3	2	1
15	I get nervous and confused when I am speaking in English.	6	5	4	3	2	1
16	I am afraid the other students will laugh at me when I speak English.	6	5	4	3	2	1
Learning Strategies							
17	When I have a problem understanding something	6	5	4	3	2	1

	we are learning in English class, I immediately ask the teacher for help.						
18	When I have a problem understanding something we are learning in English class, I only seek help just before the assignment due.	6	5	4	3	2	1
19	When I have a problem understanding something we are learning in English class, I just forget about it.	6	5	4	3	2	1
20	When it comes to English homework, I put some effort into it, but not as much as I could.	6	5	4	3	2	1
21	When it comes to English homework, I work very carefully, making sure I understand everything.	6	5	4	3	2	1
22	When it comes to English homework, I just skim over.	6	5	4	3	2	1
23	Considering how I study English, I can honestly say that I do just enough work to get along.	6	5	4	3	2	1
24	Considering how I study English, I will pass on the basis of sheer luck or intelligence because I do very little work.	6	5	4	3	2	1
25	Considering how I study English, I really try to learn English.	6	5	4	3	2	1
26	After I get my English assignment back, I always review my mistakes and	6	5	4	3	2	1

	correct them as far as I can.						
27	After I get my English assignment back, I don't want to look at my mistakes.	6	5	4	3	2	1
28	After I get my English assignment back, I look over them, but I won't bother to correct them.	6	5	4	3	2	1
29	When I am in English class, I volunteer answers as much as possible.	6	5	4	3	2	1
30	When I am in English class, I answer only easy questions.	6	5	4	3	2	1
31	When I am in English class, I never say anything.	6	5	4	3	2	1
32	When I am in English class, I will only answer when my teacher asks me question.	6	5	4	3	2	1
33	I don't watch English TV.	6	5	4	3	2	1
34	I always watch English movies.	6	5	4	3	2	1
35	I learn English through pop songs.	6	5	4	3	2	1
36	I always tries to listen to the English spoken my the TV/movie stars without reading the subtitles.	6	5	4	3	2	1

Thank you very much.

Summary Statistics and reliability estimation for the questionnaire (n=

	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Q1 I want to take English course to improve my English proficiency.	3.00	6.00	5.31	.760
Q2 Even if I were not required to take an English language course, I would still want to take one.	3.00	6.00	5.03	.905
Q3 If I had a choice to take language course, I would still want to take an English course.	2.00	6.00	4.79	1.048
Q4 I think university students should still take an English language course.	3.00	6.00	5.31	.806
Q5 I can see the need of using English to give a presentation.	3.00	6.00	5.03	.865
Q6 Whenever I write diary, I will try to write in English.	1.00	5.00	3.24	1.090
Q7 I can see the need to use English to write academic paper.	3.00	6.00	5.03	.865
Q8 I would like to know more about English speaking people	4.00	6.00	5.24	.739
Q9 The more I get to know the English speaking people, the more I want to be	3.00	6.00	4.86	.915
Q10 If I were visiting an English speaking country I would like to be able to speak fluent English	4.00	6.00	5.55	.631
Q11 I often wish I could read and listen to English fluently.	1.00	6.00	5.48	1.089
Q12 Studying English can be important for me only because I will need it for my future career.	3.00	6.00	4.93	1.131
Q13 Studying English can make me become a more knowledgeable person.	3.00	6.00	5.24	.786
Q14 It embarrassed me to volunteer answers in our English class.	1.00	6.00	3.96	1.238
Q15 I get nervous and confused when I am speaking in English.	1.00	6.00	3.89	1.175
Q16 I am afraid the other students	1.00	6.00	3.65	1.395

will laugh at me when I speak English.				
Q17 When I have a problem understanding something we are learning in English class, I immediately ask the teacher for help.	1.00	6.00	4.00	1.000
Q18 When I have a problem understanding something we are learning in English class, I only seek help just before the assignment due.	2.00	5.00	3.51	.737
Q19 When I have a problem understanding something we are learning in English class, I just forget about it.	2.00	5.00	3.48	.828
Q20 When it comes to English homework, I put some effort into it, but not as much as I could.	1.00	5.00	3.44	.948
Q21 When it comes to English homework, I work very carefully, making sure I understand everything.	3.00	6.00	4.20	.818
Q22 When it comes to English homework, I just skim over.	2.00	5.00	3.37	.820
Q23 Considering how I study English, I can honestly say that I do just enough work to get along.	3.00	6.00	4.10	.772
Q24 Considering how I study English, I will pass on the basis of sheer luck or intelligence because I do very little work.	2.00	5.00	3.62	1.014
Q25 Considering how I study English, I really try to learn English.	2.00	4.00	3.48	.633
Q26 After I get my English assignment back, I always review my mistakes and correct them as far as I can.	3.00	6.00	4.37	.902
Q27 After I get my English assignment back, I don't want to look at my mistakes.	1.00	4.00	2.58	.866
Q28 After I get my English assignment back, I look over them, but I won't bother to correct them.	1.00	6.00	3.13	.953
Q29 When I am in English class, I volunteer answers as much as possible.	1.00	6.00	3.34	1.044
Q30 When I am in English class, I	2.00	5.00	3.65	.856

answer only easy questions.				
Q31 When I am in English class, I never say anything.	1.00	5.00	3.20	1.013
Q32 When I am in English class, I will only answer when my teacher asks me question.	2.00	5.00	4.06	.703
Q33 I don't watch English TV.	1.00	4.00	2.44	1.055
Q34 I always watch English movies.	3.00	6.00	4.48	1.213
Q35 I learn English through pop songs.	2.00	5.00	3.72	1.098
Q36 I always tries to listen to the English spoken my the TV/movie stars without reading the subtitles.	1.00	6.00	3.55	.985
Valid N (listwise)				