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English as a Foreign Language and Motivation for Learning: A Comparative Perspective

Abstract

In recent years, the need for English as a foreign language (EFL) education in schools has become a priority worldwide. The aim of our paper is to investigate which countries currently focus on researching motivation to learn EFL and what potential reasons are behind the focus. We performed a topic search of the keywords “EFL” and “motivation” in the *Web of Science* database for 2020. In total, we found 61 Social Sciences Citation Index (SSCI) articles. Asia prevails, especially Eastern Asian Chinese speaking regions (Mainland China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong). Policies in Asian regions such as China and Taiwan highly support EFL. There is the aim to develop Taiwan into a “bilingual nation”. Likewise, the European Union promotes the establishment of the so-called European Education Area within which studying and training should be accessible and profitable for people living in the EU. Spain remains the European country with the highest number of EFL motivation publications. There were only a few papers from the Americas. In South America, we see evidence of the beginnings of a CLIL push, which has the potential to lead to expanded EFL motivation research in these previously under researched areas.

Keywords: English as a foreign language, motivation, Asia, Europe, Americas

Introduction

English has become an indispensable tool for global communication. Due to the prominence of English as the lingua franca of business, academia, and tourism, the need for English as a foreign language (EFL) education in schools has become a priority worldwide.

In order to provide an international view, this paper is a result of collaboration among a team of diverse researchers from the Czech Republic, Taiwan, and the United States. The cultural diversity of this team affords a nuanced perspective into the state of English language learning motivation research on a global scale. Our focus has been on research into motivating students to learn English worldwide.

Recent reviews of literature have found that Asian countries predominate the research in the field of EFL motivation (Boo, Dörnyei & Ryan, 2015; Vonkova et al., 2020). In Europe, a vast majority of the research has come from Spain, due to the unique multilingual and multicultural landscape and widespread emphasis on CLIL (Vonkova et al., 2020). Whereas, research in the Americas is just beginning to take shape.

Research questions

Picking up where previous reviews left off, we intend to investigate whether Asian countries still lead the current research on EFL motivation, or whether other

countries have also begun to focus more on this topic. The aim of this paper is to analyze the research by geographic region to determine which countries focused on EFL motivation in 2020. We discuss potential reasons for EFL motivation research (or lack thereof) by geographic region.

Our main research questions are as follows:

- (1) Which countries are currently focused on EFL motivation research?
- (2) What are the potential reasons for the focus (or lack thereof) on EFL motivation research?

Methods

We used the *Web of Science* database and made a search of Social Sciences Citation Index (SSCI) articles on the topic “EFL AND motivation” published in 2020 and belonging to the category of Education and Educational Research. Specifically, we searched for the following: TOPIC: “EFL” AND “motivation”. We refined the search by ‘document type’: ARTICLE and ‘*Web of Science* category’: EDUCATION & EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH. The timespan was reduced to articles published in ‘2020’. With the ‘Indexes’ set to include only articles from the SSCI. Our search was performed in January 2021. The number of returned records was 61.

These 61 papers were extracted from the category ‘Education & Educational Research’ as indicated by the *Web of Science* records. However, due to overlap, some papers appeared in additional categories. 57.4% (n=35) of these papers overlapped with the category of ‘linguistics’ while the category of ‘language linguistics’ accounted for 21.3% (n=13). The remaining categories were ‘psychology educational’ with 6.6% (n=4) of the overlap results and ‘computer science interdisciplinary applications’ with 4.9% (n=3). In general, the significant majority of the overlapping categories were categorized in the *Web of Science* database as linguistic/language linguistic oriented studies, followed by psychology and computer science.

Results

We analyzed the country of research in all 61 papers. Specifically, we classified the papers based on region and then specified by country:

- a) Eastern Asia: China (n=15, 24.6%), Taiwan (n=10, 16.4%), Hong Kong (n=4, 6.6%), South Korea (n=3, 4.9%), Japan (n=1, 1.6%);
- b) Southeastern Asia: Cambodia (n=1, 1.6%), Viet Nam (n=1, 1.6%), Thailand (n=1, 1.6%), Malaysia (n=1, 1.6%);
- c) Middle East: Iran (n=4, 6.6%), Turkey (n=2, 3.3%), Saudi Arabia (n=1, 1.6%), Yemen (n=1, 1.6%);
- d) Europe: Spain (n=5, 8.2%), Denmark (n=2, 3.3%), Germany (n=2, 3.3%), France (n=1, 1.6%);
- e) The Americas: Chile (n=2, 3.3%), Colombia (n=2, 3.3%), the United States (n=1, 1.6%);
- f) Oceania: Australia (n=1, 1.6%);
- g) Non-empirical (n=1, 1.6%).

The total number of countries in the above overview is 62 because one study sourced participants in both Chile and Australia.

Asia prevails, especially Eastern Asian Chinese speaking regions (Mainland China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong), which overwhelmingly produced the most EFL motivation publications. In total 47.5% (n=29) of the total papers came from these Chinese speaking regions.

In accordance with the findings discussed by Vonkova et al. (2020), Spain remains the European country with the highest number of EFL motivation publications, producing the most publications outside of Eastern Asia. We also found research papers from both Southeastern Asia and South America; these areas appear as emerging EFL research settings.

Discussion

We discuss potential reasons for the focus on EFL motivation research in different regions.

Motivation to learn EFL: research in Asia

Mainland China and Taiwan were found to be the top publishing regions in the field of research on EFL motivation. The Ministry of Education (MOE) in China has focused a great deal of attention on improving EFL learning, as demonstrated by the publication of “National English Curriculum Standards (NECS)” by the Chinese MOE in 2001. These standards aim to upgrade the quality of English learning in Chinese nine-year compulsory education and senior high school education. It is clear from a review of the “National English Curriculum Standards (NECS)” (Chinese MOE, 2001, 2011), that there are five main objectives in Chinese EFL learning. The first objective is to build up students’ affect for learning English, such as their motivation, patriotism, and confidence. The second objective is to cultivate students’ knowledge, awareness, and understanding of cultural issues in learning English. When discussing the language skills and language knowledge for the third and fourth objectives, the government emphasizes the key capacities of listening, speaking, reading, writing, phonetics, grammar and vocabulary. Finally, the fifth objective is to increase students’ learning, thereby increasing their abilities of thinking, communication and discipline (Chinese MOE, 2001, 2011).

Taiwan has begun to adopt EFL education in recent years, since it is regarded as being a vital investment in the future of the nation. More specifically, in 2018, the Ministry of Education published a “Blueprint for Developing Taiwan into a Bilingual Nation by 2030” (Republic of China (Taiwan) MOE, 2018, 2020). As a result, Taiwan has created partnerships among schools, industries, and research centers for communication, collaboration, and interaction. For example, the MOE has invested a great deal of effort in establishing learning English, from primary to higher education, with the intended aim of developing Taiwan into a “Bilingual Nation” (Republic of China (Taiwan) MOE, 2018, 2020).

Due to the importance placed on English language learning and its association with the development of individual citizens, and on a larger scale, the national economy, EFL research has begun to include an investigation of motivation in Taiwan. There are several studies suggesting that motivation is essential for EFL learning. For example, Chang’s (2020) study investigated Taiwanese EFL teachers’

beliefs and actual practices related to learners' autonomy. This study suggested some implications in terms of promoting learners' autonomy by teachers, such as developing student-centered teaching approaches, supporting autonomy with classroom practices, and designing classroom activities that encourage students' interest and motivation.

Motivation to learn EFL: research in Europe

The European Union is aware of the importance of multiculturalism and promotes the establishment of the so-called European Education Area within which studying and training should be accessible and profitable for people living in the EU. The policy of the European Commission and the European Education Area contains the recommendation that all Europeans possess proficiency in two foreign languages aside from their mother tongue (European Commission, 2019).

Eurostat's administrative statistics on education include regularly updated information about the commonly taught foreign languages within the EU. Reports from 2017 and 2020 show that at the primary and lower secondary education level (ISCED 1 and 2), English is the number one language in EU countries (Eurostat, 2020a).

As of 2018, 48% of pupils at the upper secondary education level (ISCED 3) in the EU were in line with the recommendation of the Commission and studied two or more foreign languages. For these multilingual students, English was the most frequently studied language (86.8% of the pupils), followed by French (19.4%), and German (18.3%) (Eurostat, 2020b).

Motivation to learn EFL: research in the Americas

In South America, English language learning has been previously viewed as a luxury afforded to the most socially and economically privileged groups. However, new perspectives regarding the importance of English language education, along with the implementation of national EFL focused educational policies, have begun to reshape these views. This change has had the effect of creating English language learning opportunities for people from a wider socio-economic range (Hernández-Fernández & Rojas, 2018).

In Colombia and Chile, there are now policy frameworks for implementing EFL education, including a legal foundation, standards for learning, student achievement, and teacher qualifications (Cronquist & Fiszbein, 2017). Chile's National English Strategy, as set forth in 2014 by the Piñera administration, aimed to improve the English proficiency of the Chilean population in order to propel the country into a more globally competitive position (Cronquist & Fiszbein, 2017). Due to the emphasis on EFL learning in these countries, we find the occurrence of EFL motivation research to be in line with the national policy initiatives. However, more research is needed to determine student motivation on a broader scale.

The findings of our keyword search indicate a slight increase in EFL motivation research in South America (Chile, n=2; Columbia, n=2). Vonkova et al. (2020), found only one paper from South America when performing a broader keyword search for EFL motivation publications between 2016 and March 2020. This increase in research may indicate a novel interest in EFL motivation research in Latin America. There is also a burgeoning interest in the introduction of content and

language integrated learning (CLIL) courses (Banegas, Corrales & Poole, 2020) in the region. Large scale introduction of CLIL and similar types of learning in South America could lead to an EFL motivation research boom similar to that of Spain in recent years.

In North America, we found only one study with participants from the United States. Our findings are in contrast to those of Boo, Dörnyei and Ryan (2015), who found that from 2005 until 2014, the United States was second only to Japan in the amount of language learning motivation research publications. When comparing this data, two considerations must be taken into account. First, Boo, Dörnyei and Ryan (2015) analyzed papers which concerned L2 learning motivation and were not limited to English learning specifically. Secondly, the lack of research from the U.S. in our results may be attributed to the keywords searched ('EFL AND motivation'). Using other keywords we could find more papers related to the research of motivation to learn English (see Conclusion for limitations of our study). However, the authors of this paper theorize that there is a dearth of current research into motivation to learn English in the United States.

Conclusion

We conclude that most of the research in EFL motivation comes from Chinese speaking regions including Mainland China and Taiwan. However, the emergence of EFL motivation research from Southeastern Asia and South America signal the growing interest in the topic on a broadening global scale. South America has the potential to become a prolific EFL motivation research setting if CLIL continues to increase in popularity in the same manner as it has in Spain. Although South America is a unique setting, composed of varied countries with rich cultural and political histories, policymakers in these areas can learn from the challenges, solutions, and research findings regarding motivation in European CLIL settings over the past two decades (Pimentel Siqueira, Landau & Albuquerque Paraná, 2018).

Our study has several limitations. We searched for the topics ("EFL" and "motivation") which resulted in finding papers clearly connected to EFL and motivation. However, there might be more papers related to the research area of English as a foreign language and motivation to learn. In the future research, it would be advisable to include the following keywords for searching articles from this research area: "English" and "motivation", "language" and "motivation" (see for example, Vonkova et al., 2020). Also, we limited our search to SSCI articles published in 2020, and the *Web of Science* category 'Education and Educational research'. Our research could be extended by looking for a larger time span, articles other than SSCI, and additional *Web of Science* categories. A related topic to motivation to learn English as a foreign language (EFL) is motivation to learn English as a second language (ESL), which could provide more insight into the state of current English language learning motivation research in L1 English speaking countries like the United States.

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