

# Chapter 11

## An Investigation of the Relationship of Motivation, Attitudes and Environment: Two Hong Kong ESL Learners' Experience

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### ABSTRACT

*This chapter will study a Philippine and a Chinese learner's approaches to learn and achieve English language proficiency over 15 years in Hong Kong using biographical approaches. It focuses on the experience of individual motivation and social learning environments, and examines the interactions between the learner's motivation, self-confidence, and competition in the global economy. The effect of the interaction on shaping English learning and the learning experiences in three aspects including formal, self-directed and natural learning environments will also be discussed through Gardner's model of socio-educational model in second language acquisition and Weiner's attribution theory in social psychology. The chapter will suggest some practical implications for students and language teachers, discusses the ways to enhance second language learning in a cosmopolitan city, and presents some possible ways to increase learners' motivation and competitiveness in the global economy.*

### INTRODUCTION

For a long time, Hong Kong students have been blamed for declining standard of English. A newspaper from The Standard in October 2012 stated that Hong Kong "is now placed seventh among 12 Asian neighbors, falling behind even Japan and South Korea" (The Standard, 2012). It is really alarming because Hong Kong was ranked second among 10 rivals in previous similar study between 2007 and 2009. Some believed that Eng-

lish proficiency has deteriorated in Hong Kong due to the introduction of the mother-tongue as medium of instruction in schools after the handover in 1997. While students' exposure to the English language has been reduced in classes after using the mother-tongue as the medium of instruction, Asian learners still have positive attitudes towards English and strong instrumental, career-related motives for second language learning, especially under the competition of global community (Lai, 1999; Poon, 2011). Research has consistently

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showed the significant role of motivation in learning (e.g., Dornyei & Schmidt, 2001; Gardner, 1985; Gardner et al., 1997). Despite high level of motivation, Hong Kong students seem unable to achieve a high level of English language proficiency. Apparently, this is a paradox. Is the current motivational paradigm insufficient to explain the current Hong Kong situation?

Inspired by Lim's study (2002) on one EFL learner's experience, the present study, which replicates part of its research approach (i.e. using Gardner's model of socio-educational and Weiner's attribution theory to study the relationship of motivation, attitudes and environment and the learners' experience in formal, self-directed and natural learning environments), investigates two ESL learner's experience over a 15-year period so as to explore the role of motivation in second language acquisition and its interaction with the dynamic environment. Individual perceptions and the effects of motivation will be discussed through using the perspectives of a socio-educational model in second language acquisition and attribution theory in social psychology.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

In order to understand why learners are motivated, it is essential to understand the learners' ultimate goal or purpose for learning the language. The two distinct type of motivation for learning a language are integrative and instrumental. Generally speaking, integrative motivation refers to a learner's desire to learn more about the cultural community of the target language or to assimilate to some degree in the target community. On the contrary, instrumental motivation refers to learners' desire to learn the language so as to fulfill some practical objectives such as passing an exam or advancing a career. Although Hong Kong students have strong instrumental motives for second language learning, it seems that it is not enough to help them master English proficiency. Therefore, it is

essential to examine whether integrative motives can help Hong Kong students gain better English proficiency and performance.

The work of Gardner and his colleagues (Clement et al., 1980; Gardner, 2001; Gardner & Macintyre, 1993; Gardner & Lambert, 1959; Gardner & Smythe, 1975; Glikman et al., 1982; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1989) have identified a number of factors that affect second language learning and have studied the roles and effects of motivation in second language learning. Gardner's (1985) socio-educational model of second language acquisition proposes that motivation is supported by two other affective components: 1) integrativeness and 2) attitudes toward the learning situation. The complex of such attitudes and motivation reflects an integrative motive that promotes language learning.

In the socio-educational model, three attributes, namely motivational intensity, desire, and attitudes toward learning the language, are regarded as the main characteristics of motivation. Motivation to learn the second language also requires three elements. First, the motivated individual expends effort to learn the language. Second, the motivated individual wants to achieve a goal. Third, the motivated individual will enjoy the task of learning the language. Moreover, there are three scales measuring attitudes toward the language group, interest in foreign languages, and integrative orientation. Gardner (1985) explained that "Languages are unlike any other subject taught in a classroom in that they involve the acquisition of skills or behavior patterns which are characteristic of another cultural community. As a consequence, the relative degree of success will be influenced to some extent by the individual's attitudes toward the other community or to other communities in general as well as by the beliefs in the community which are relevant to the language learning process" (p. 146). These features distinguish the socio-educational model from other educational perspectives. Second language

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