

# Exploring English Learning Motivation among Chinese University Students

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**Abstract:** While motivation is widely recognised as a key factor in language learning, existing theories often overlook the unique socio-cultural influences shaping Chinese university students' motivations, necessitating a context-specific investigation. This study adopts a quantitative research design using a 4-point Likert scale questionnaire to examine English learning motivation among Chinese university students at Henan University. Using stratified random sampling, 400 students were selected to ensure balanced proficiency representation. The results indicate that instrumental motivation is the most prevalent, with individual development, immediate achievement, and information medium emerging as the strongest motivators. The high score for information medium underscores students' perception of English as a gateway to academic knowledge, global economic advancements, and technological developments. Notably, social responsibility ranked higher than intrinsic interest, suggesting that external factors, including national identity, parental expectations, and societal influences, play a critical role in shaping students' motivation. These findings highlight a shift in motivational patterns, where English is increasingly seen as a means for accessing global information rather than just for academic or career advancement. Additionally, the influence of social responsibility indicates a broader connection between language learning and national or cultural identity. This study contributes to the understanding of English learning motivation in China by incorporating both individual and societal perspectives. It underscores the need for further longitudinal and comparative studies to explore how motivation evolves over time and across different educational and cultural contexts. The findings may inform curriculum development and pedagogical strategies aimed at fostering more sustainable and meaningful engagement with English learning.

**Keywords:** Chinese university students, English learning motivation, instrumental motivation, motivational types, social responsibility

## Introduction

English has long dominated the academic world, serving as a vital medium for professional and cultural exchanges (Yusob, Afandi, Zaini, & Aziz, 2024). In China, English holds a prominent position within the education system, particularly in higher education, where it is closely linked to students' academic performance and future career trajectories (Li & Fang, 2017). Despite its importance, low levels of motivation remain a significant challenge among Chinese university students learning English (Xing & Bolden, 2019; Fuchs & Rudyak, 2019). Many learners lack well-defined goals and display limited enthusiasm for acquiring the language. Observable behaviours, such as disengagement, inattentiveness, and a lack of active participation, highlight the need to investigate

the underlying motivational factors influencing these patterns. Moreover, it is essential to explore effective strategies to stimulate and sustain their motivation, as well as to address the barriers that impede progress in language learning.

Motivation has long been regarded as a critical determinant of success in second/foreign language (L2) acquisition. Theoretical frameworks developed by scholars (Dörnyei & Kubanyiova, 2014; Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2021) underscore its role in shaping learners' engagement, perseverance, and overall performance. Dörnyei (2009) argues that motivation constitutes a central factor in learners' willingness and ability to acquire a new language. Conversely, insufficient motivation presents significant challenges that hinder the effectiveness of the learning process.

Traditional conceptualisations of motivation, particularly Gardner's (1985) distinction between integrative and instrumental types, have provided foundational insights into language learning behaviours. However, these frameworks may not fully capture the complexities of learners' motivations in specific sociocultural contexts, such as those found in China. Gao, Zhao, Cheng, and Zhou (2003) proposed a motivational classification model designed specifically for Chinese learners of English, offering a more localised and nuanced understanding of their motivational drivers. This model expands upon existing theories by incorporating factors that reflect the unique characteristics of Chinese educational and cultural environments. A re-examination of these motivational types is essential for addressing the persistent challenges faced by university students and for informing strategies to enhance their learning outcomes.

Despite notable advancements in English education across China, higher education institutions continue to face significant challenges. Key barriers include large class sizes, the prevalence of traditional grammar-translation teaching methods, and insufficient interaction with proficient speakers (Liang, 2018; Huang, 2023). However, the lack of motivation among learners remains a fundamental issue. Understanding the various types of motivation is crucial for developing targeted interventions and educational practices that support effective language acquisition. Identifying motivational factors and leveraging them to foster students' sustained engagement is essential for addressing this issue.

This study investigates the primary types of English learning motivation among university students in China, using Gao et al.'s (2003) motivational classification model as its theoretical foundation. By examining these motivational dimensions, it aims to provide insights into learners' diverse motivational profiles and offer practical recommendations for enhancing English teaching strategies in higher education. To achieve this, the study is guided by the following research question:

1. What are the main types of English learning motivation among university students in China?

## **Literature Review**

Motivation plays a crucial role in second language acquisition (SLA), shaping learners' engagement, persistence, and overall success (Dörnyei, 2005). Research on language learning motivation has been significantly influenced by the foundational work of Gardner and Lambert, who, from the 1980s, introduced integrative and instrumental orientations-distinguishing between motivation driven by cultural affinity and that based on practical benefits. Later scholars, including Ryan and Deci (2000a) and Gao et al. (2003), expanded on these concepts, offering broader theoretical perspectives. This section reviews key classifications of motivation, focusing on integrative and instrumental orientations, intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, and Gao's framework within the Chinese context.

### *Integrative and Instrumental Motivation*

The distinction between integrative and instrumental motivation in second language acquisition has been widely explored, particularly by Gardner and Lambert (1972). Integrative motivation involves learning a language to engage with its speakers and culture, while instrumental motivation refers to acquiring a language for practical benefits, such as career advancement or academic success. Both forms significantly influence language learning outcomes (Cook, 2002). Gardner (1985) and Ellis

(1997) further develop these concepts, with Gardner highlighting that integrative motivation fosters a deeper connection with the target language community, whereas instrumental motivation is driven by tangible rewards. Ellis (1997) argues that integrative motivation is generally more effective, promoting sustained engagement in language learning.

Empirical studies have produced mixed findings on the relative efficacy of these motivations. Gardner and Lambert (1972) suggest that integrative motivation sustains long-term language learning, a claim supported by Spolsky (2007), who found a positive correlation between integrative motivation and higher language proficiency. However, Lukmani (1972) reported that Marathi-speaking learners in India attained greater proficiency through instrumental motivation, a trend also observed in the Philippines (Gardner & Lambert, 1972). These discrepancies indicate that cultural and contextual factors influence motivational effectiveness.

Critics argue that Gardner's framework, primarily based on research in bilingual Canada, may not be universally applicable. Gass (1988) highlights cases in the Northwest Amazon, where language acquisition among interethnic spouses challenges the distinction between integrative and instrumental motivation. Furthermore, in many non-English-speaking countries, English is often learned successfully for instrumental reasons alone. Gardner himself acknowledges that in certain contexts, instrumental motivation can be equally predictive of language learning success.

Despite these variations, the integrative-instrumental framework remains a foundational model for understanding language learning motivation. The effectiveness of either orientation depends on sociocultural and contextual variables, underscoring the need for a more nuanced approach to motivational research in second language acquisition.

### *Intrinsic and Extrinsic Motivation*

Self-Determination Theory (SDT), introduced by Ryan and Deci (2000b), categorises motivation into amotivation, extrinsic motivation, and intrinsic motivation, based on the underlying reasons driving behaviour. Among these, intrinsic and extrinsic motivation have received the most attention in educational research due to their practical implications.

Extrinsic motivation refers to behaviours driven by external rewards or pressures. Ryan and Deci (2000a) identify four types of extrinsic motivation along a continuum of self-determination: external regulation, introjected regulation, identified regulation, and integrated regulation. External regulation is the least autonomous, where behaviour is controlled by external rewards or punishments. Introjected regulation involves internal pressures linked to self-worth or guilt. Identified regulation occurs when an individual values an activity and engages in it willingly. Integrated regulation, the most autonomous form, aligns the activity with one's core values and identity (Ryan & Deci, 2000a).

Intrinsic motivation, by contrast, stems from genuine interest and enjoyment of an activity itself, independent of external rewards (Ryan & Deci, 2000a). This motivation is sustained by two fundamental psychological needs: autonomy and competence. Autonomy refers to engaging in activities out of personal choice rather than external control, while competence relates to an individual's perception of their ability to succeed (Niemiec & Ryan, 2009). When these needs are met, intrinsic motivation fosters persistence, creativity, and deeper learning engagement (Ryan & Deci, 2020).

Intrinsic motivation is often regarded as the most desirable form of motivation in education, as it promotes long-term engagement, curiosity, and meaningful learning (Ryan & Deci, 2020). However, extrinsic motivation can be effective for achieving short-term goals and driving performance, particularly in structured learning environments. Understanding the interplay between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation provides valuable insights for enhancing student engagement and learning outcomes. The next section introduces motivation classification theories in the Chinese context, with a focus on Gao's framework, which serves as a theoretical foundation for this study.

### *Gao Yihong's Classification of L2 Motivation*

Gao Yihong et al. (2003) conducted a large-scale study involving 2,278 undergraduates from 30 Chinese universities to identify the key motivational factors driving English learning. Using an inductive approach, the researchers collected qualitative responses from students across different

regions, which informed the development of a comprehensive L2 motivation questionnaire. Factor analysis of the responses revealed seven motivation types: intrinsic interest, immediate achievement, going abroad, learning situation, social responsibility, personal development, and information medium.

These categories capture both personal and societal drivers unique to the Chinese context. Immediate achievement motivation focuses on short-term goals or specific outcomes, such as passing exams, meeting course requirements, or obtaining university certification. Personal development emphasises individual growth, with learners perceiving English as a means to broaden their horizons, enhance cognitive skills, and access new opportunities that enrich their lives. Information medium motivation arises from the recognition of English as a crucial tool for acquiring and disseminating knowledge. Learners value English as a gateway to global information, helping them stay updated on international events, scientific advancements, and technological innovations. Meanwhile, intrinsic interest stems from a genuine fascination with the English language itself or the process of learning it. Students with this motivation enjoy the linguistic structures, sounds, and rhythm of English, finding personal fulfilment in mastering its complexities. Going abroad motivation reflects aspirations to study, work, or live abroad, with learners viewing English as essential for adapting to foreign environments and engaging in cross-cultural communication. Social responsibility motivation embodies a sense of duty to society, where learners see English as a way to contribute to international understanding, assist others, or promote their country's development on a global stage. Lastly, learning situation motivation is shaped by various environmental factors, including the quality of instruction, classroom dynamics, peer interactions, teacher enthusiasm, and external pressures such as parental expectations.

Gao et al. (2003) further grouped these seven categories into three broader constructs: instrumental, cultural, and situational motivations. Instrumental motivation includes information medium, personal development, and immediate achievement, emphasising practical benefits such as career or academic success. Cultural motivation relates to engagement with the target language's culture and the promotion of one's own cultural identity. Situational motivation encompasses environmental factors influencing learning experiences, such as instructional quality and social dynamics. While going abroad and social responsibility contain both instrumental and cultural elements, this study classifies them primarily as cultural motivations for three reasons. First, from a theoretical perspective, both categories align more closely with Gardner and Lambert's (1972) concept of integrative motivation, which emphasises cultural identification and cross-cultural engagement rather than immediate practical benefits. Second, going abroad reflects an aspiration for cross-cultural experiences rather than merely academic or professional advancement, making it more relevant to cultural rather than purely instrumental motivation. Third, social responsibility is rooted in the desire to promote Chinese culture globally, reflecting a cultural rather than a pragmatic orientation. By adopting this classification, the study provides a clearer analytical framework for understanding the underlying drivers of English learning motivation in the Chinese context.

The review of existing literature highlights the diverse motivational factors influencing English learning. While research on English learning motivation in China has developed over the past two decades, the overall body of work remains limited. Studies specifically focusing on L2 motivation within the Chinese context are scarce, with most research relying on Western theoretical models rather than classifications suited to Chinese learners. Moreover, existing studies often examine motivation alongside other learner factors, limiting an in-depth exploration of motivation types. Given this gap, this study aims to identify the predominant motivation types among Chinese university students through a quantitative survey. The following section outlines the research design, including data collection and analysis methods.

## **Methodology**

This study employed a cross-sectional survey to investigate the primary types of English learning motivation among university students in China. Henan University was selected due to its historical and educational significance, as well as its diverse undergraduate programmes spanning multiple teaching departments, ensuring a broad and representative sample. Additionally, the student body at

Henan University is heterogeneous, which allows for a more comprehensive exploration of diverse motivational factors in English learning.

A stratified random sampling technique was used to recruit 400 students, consisting of 200 who had passed and 200 who had failed the College English Test Band 4 (CET-4). The CET-4 is a standardised national English proficiency test administered by the National College English Testing Committee under the Ministry of Education. It assesses listening, reading, and writing skills and serves as a widely recognised benchmark for university students' English proficiency. Additionally, the passing rate of CET-4 is often used as a key indicator for evaluating teaching quality in Chinese higher education institutions (Yang, Jiang, & Zhao, 2017). Categorising participants based on CET-4 performance ensured a diverse range of proficiency levels, minimising potential bias towards either highly motivated or less proficient learners.

The sample size was determined using Krejcie and Morgan's (1970) sample size table, which provides guidelines for determining appropriate sample sizes in survey research. A total of 450 questionnaires were distributed, yielding 438 valid responses, resulting in a high response rate of 97%. To ensure balanced representation, a stratified random sampling method was used to select 200 students who had passed CET-4 and 200 who had not for the final analysis.

A structured questionnaire was used to measure key L2 motivational factors, with all items rated on a four-point Likert scale. The primary reason for using a four-point scale was to reduce response tendencies towards the middle category, a phenomenon frequently observed in self-report questionnaires (Weijters, Cabooter, & Schillewaert, 2010). In second language acquisition research, minimising response bias is particularly important for accurately measuring constructs such as motivation and learner attitudes (Dörnyei & Taguchi, 2010). Additionally, previous studies on foreign language learning motivation in China have widely adopted four-point Likert scales, demonstrating their reliability and effectiveness in this context (Gao et al., 2003).

The questionnaire was administered in English language classrooms at the selected university with the cooperation of instructors. Prior to distribution, formal approval was obtained from the university's administrative body. To ensure confidentiality, the questionnaire was conducted anonymously. To maximise participation, the researcher accompanied instructors to the classrooms, provided an oral explanation of the study's purpose, and emphasised the voluntary nature of participation. Students were assured that their responses were strictly for academic purposes and that their participation would not impact their academic performance. The questionnaire was designed to be completed within 20 minutes and included clear instructions to guide participants.

The collected data were analysed for reliability and validity using Cronbach's Alpha, the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure of sampling adequacy, and Bartlett's test of sphericity. Descriptive statistics were employed to examine the strength and distribution of each motivational factor within the sample. The analysis aimed to identify the predominant types of motivation among university students.

## **Findings and Discussion**

In this section, findings from the questionnaires distributed to Chinese university students are discussed. The descriptive statistics of the seven motivational scales relevant to the research question are presented, using mean (M) and standard deviation (SD) to identify the dominant types of English learning motivation.

Before examining the specific motivational types, the reliability and validity of the measurement instrument were assessed to ensure the appropriateness of the data for further analysis. The internal consistency of the questionnaire was evaluated using Cronbach's Alpha, which yielded a value of 0.904. This value exceeds the commonly accepted threshold of 0.70, indicating a high level of reliability for the instrument. Additionally, the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) Measure of Sampling Adequacy was employed to assess the suitability of the data for statistical analysis. The KMO value was 0.891, well above the threshold of 0.50, suggesting that the data are highly appropriate for further analysis. Bartlett's Test of Sphericity was also applied to examine whether the correlation matrix deviated significantly from an identity matrix. The test returned a significant result ( $\chi^2 = 6568.456$ ,  $df = 561$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), confirming that the variables are related and supporting the use of the measurement

tool for the construct under study. These results collectively confirm the reliability and validity of the questionnaire, ensuring it is a robust tool for assessing motivational factors in the context of English language learning.

As shown in Table 1, mean values ranged from 2.14 to 3.16 on a 4-point scale, indicating an overall positive disposition towards English learning. The highest mean scores were recorded for individual development (M = 3.16, SD = 0.60), immediate achievement (M = 3.12, SD = 0.66), and information medium (M = 3.12, SD = 0.65). This suggests that students primarily learn English for career advancement, academic success, and access to global knowledge. Cultural motivation showed moderate influence, with intrinsic interest (M = 2.66, SD = 0.70) and social responsibility (M = 2.75, SD = 0.71) scoring lower but still above 2.50. Notably, social responsibility scored slightly higher, indicating that some students view English learning as a contribution to society rather than purely personal interest. The lowest mean scores were found in going abroad (M = 2.14, SD = 0.75) and learning situation (M = 2.32, SD = 0.78), suggesting that studying abroad and the classroom environment play a less significant role in students' motivation. This may be due to financial constraints, limited overseas opportunities, or stronger domestic career aspirations.

**Table 1.** Mean Values of Motivational Scales

Motivational scales		N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation	
Motivational types	Instrumental	ind.dev	400	1.00	4.00	3.16	.60
		imm.ach	400	1.00	4.00	3.12	.66
		inf.med	400	1.00	4.00	3.12	.65
	Cultural	intr.inc	400	1.00	4.00	2.66	.70
		social.r	400	1.00	4.00	2.75	.71
		goabroad	400	1.00	4.00	2.14	.75
	Situational	situatio	400	1.00	4.00	2.32	.78
Valid N (listwise)		400					

ind.dev = individual development; imm.ach = immediate achievement; Inf.med = information medium; intr.int = intrinsic interest; social.r = social responsibility; goabroad = going abroad; situatio = learning situation

The consistently high mean scores across three motivational scales—individual development, immediate achievement, and information medium—highlight the primarily instrumental nature of English learning in the Chinese context. This finding reaffirms the predominance of instrumental motivation among Chinese university students, aligning with previous research (Gao et al., 2003; Gardner & Lambert, 1972; Zhang & Du, 2021; Zheng, Chen, & Wang, 2023). These motivation types reflect the practical considerations that drive English learning, emphasising its role in personal growth, academic success, and access to information.

The instrumental and symbolic value of English remains a key motivator for Chinese students. As Pan and Block (2011) observed, Chinese students perceive English as having a higher communicative potential and status, reinforcing its role as a global language. This corresponds with De Swaan's (2013) hierarchical global language system theory, which posits that speakers of various languages prioritise learning those that offer greater socio-economic and communicative advantages. The perception of English as a superior and globally dominant language further strengthens its appeal, making it an essential tool for academic, professional, and informational pursuits in an increasingly interconnected world.

While instrumental motivation remains dominant, shifts in motivation patterns are evident. Earlier studies linked instrumental motivation mainly to academic and career-related benefits (Gardner & Lambert, 1972; Zhang & Du, 2021; Zheng et al., 2023), but the present study suggests that the role of English as an information medium is becoming increasingly prominent. Unlike traditional instrumental motivations focused on exams and job prospects, the concept of information medium motivation highlights the growing importance of English as a gateway to accessing and understanding global knowledge. This form of motivation stems from the perception that English proficiency enables individuals to engage with a broad spectrum of information resources, including academic research, economic and technological developments, and international discourse. Students

with high scores in this category indicated that they learned English not simply as a subject but as a tool for acquiring knowledge across disciplines and staying informed about worldwide advancements.

In an era of digital globalisation, access to knowledge, international news, and multimedia content in English has become a key driver for language learning. The proliferation of online education platforms, scientific publications, and global social media networks reinforces the perception of English as an indispensable tool for acquiring up-to-date information and engaging with the international community (Pennycook, 2017). Unlike digital resources that serve merely as technological facilitators, the concept of information medium motivation highlights English's functional role in knowledge acquisition, extending beyond communication to its significance in intellectual and professional development. Students recognise that mastering English enhances their ability to engage with a wide array of sources, from scientific journals and financial reports to global cultural productions. This perception reflects a broader understanding of English as a means to expand intellectual horizons rather than just a skill for examination success (Van Lier, 2010).

Moreover, this shift reflects broader transformations in learners' priorities. Beyond academic and professional aspirations, many now view English proficiency as a means to stay informed about global affairs, access cutting-edge research, and participate in cross-cultural discussions (Phillipson, 2018). The increasing consumption of English—language news outlets, podcasts, and video content—ranging from TED Talks to online courses—illustrates how language learning extends beyond formal education into personal development and global connectivity. This trend also aligns with China's expanding role in international affairs, where acquiring knowledge in English has become essential for staying competitive and engaged in global conversations.

Among cultural motivations, social responsibility received a slightly higher mean score than intrinsic interest, marking a trend that warrants further investigation. While previous studies have primarily emphasised instrumental and intrinsic motivations (Vaezi, 2008; Zhang & Shao, 2021), social responsibility has not been widely recognised as a distinct motivational factor. Findings indicate that some students perceive English proficiency as a means to contribute to national development and global engagement. Responses to questionnaire items such as *"I learn English in order to let the world know more about China"* and *"Only when I have a good command of English can I contribute to Chinese prosperity"* suggest an association between English learning and a sense of duty towards national identity.

This trend may be influenced by broader socio-political and cultural developments in China, particularly the Cultural Renaissance movement and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The revival of traditional Chinese culture has reinforced a collective national identity, fostering a sense of responsibility among young learners to communicate China's heritage and values to the world. Concurrently, the BRI has expanded opportunities for international collaboration, reinforcing the perception of English proficiency as a crucial skill for engaging in global exchanges. While instrumental motivation remains dominant, the relatively high ranking of social responsibility suggests that students' English learning motivations may extend beyond personal and academic aspirations to align with national and international objectives.

Furthermore, familial expectations may reinforce this sense of responsibility, as some students associate English proficiency with fulfilling parental aspirations, as reflected in responses to the questionnaire item: *"Only when I have a good command of English can I live up to the expectations of my parents."* The fact that social responsibility ranked slightly higher than intrinsic interest suggests that external influences—ranging from national development goals to societal and familial expectations—may exert a stronger impact on students' motivation than personal enjoyment or intellectual curiosity. While the difference is not substantial, it highlights an evolving motivational pattern that warrants further examination, particularly in relation to changing socio-cultural dynamics and policy influences in China.

These findings underscore the evolving landscape of English learning motivation in China. While traditional instrumental motives remain strong, the growing emphasis on English as an information medium indicates a shift towards a more knowledge-driven rationale for language acquisition. This suggests that future educational policies and curricula should consider integrating English learning with broader knowledge acquisition strategies, equipping students not only with linguistic skills but also with the ability to critically engage with global information sources.

## Conclusion

Overall, the findings highlight the predominance of instrumental motivation among Chinese university students, with individual development, information medium, and academic achievement serving as key driving forces. The growing significance of English as an information medium reflects broader trends in digital globalisation, reinforcing its role in accessing global knowledge, technological advancements, and economic opportunities. Additionally, the emergence of social responsibility as a motivational factor underscores the complex interplay between personal aspirations, societal expectations, and national identity in shaping students' language learning behaviours.

## Suggestions for Future Research

Future research could further investigate the influence of social responsibility on English learning motivation, particularly exploring its underlying mechanisms. Given that this study found social responsibility to be slightly more influential than intrinsic interest, qualitative approaches such as interviews or case studies could provide deeper insights into how national identity, parental expectations, and external pressures shape students' motivation. Additionally, as digital resources play an increasingly vital role in language learning, future studies could examine how online platforms and social media impact students' engagement with English.

Moreover, since motivation evolves over time, longitudinal studies could track university students from their first to final year to capture motivational shifts. Regular surveys and in-depth interviews at key academic milestones (e.g., post-exam periods or study abroad experiences) would offer valuable insights. Comparative research across different educational contexts, such as public versus private universities or urban versus rural institutions, could further reveal how institutional and regional factors shape motivation. These findings could inform educational policies and curriculum design to enhance students' long-term engagement with English learning.

## Co-Author Contribution

The authors confirm that there is no conflict of interest in this article. Author 1 conducted the literature review, performed the data analysis, and interpreted the results, while Author 2 refined the structure and improved the language quality.

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