University Learners' Motivation toward Undertaking a Project Work Course

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Abstract

A project work course is an important subject that receives considerable research. Despite the fact that a plethora of studies have examined the learning issues of a project work course, relevant systematic research on university student motivations toward undertaking a project work course is still lacking in the field of English Language Teaching (ELT). Understanding student motivation within subjects is central to the development of informed policies for promoting better student research engagement and quality. This study explores the perspectives of Taiwanese Applied English university students in terms of their level of interest and motivation toward a project work course. Five identified categories of learner motivation toward a project work course suggest that keeping a learner's motivation internally sustained or externally regulated should not only be equally valued but also be manifested in a social participatory circumstance.

Keywords: (graduate) project work course, (graduate) project course, (graduate) project making course, (graduate) report making course, motivation, students of Applied English

Introduction

One afternoon during a class break, a group of university teachers were discussing their problems with students in a (graduate) project work course. “If they don’t come to the meetings, how can I help them?” said Teacher A. “Right, students should be responsible for their own projects. After all, the projects are theirs, not ours. How could they expect us to do everything for them?” responded Teacher B. “I don’t not have that issue but my students are a little bit too demanding.” Teacher C added, “They were all over me calling me like a craze. They were already ahead of their schedule. Don’t they know that we, teachers, are busy. Oh, please give me a break.”

This kind of dialogue is nothing new to most university supervisors in a project work course. These teachers are sometimes frustrated because they do not understand their student’s learning behaviors in spite of their considerable supervisory efforts. However, current literature does not contribute to solve this puzzle as a dominant research trend focuses on teacher perspectives rather than student perspectives in researching a project work course (Lin, 2010). A wealth of research is dedicated mainly in understanding the effectiveness of new pedagogical designs, learning process and learning problems of learners as well as to build up theoretical constructs in a project work course (Hsiao, Chang & Huang, 2000; Kao & Yen, 2007; Lin, 2010; Wang & Lin, 2001). This line of research tends to primarily assess learning behaviors, outcomes and problems. These preoccupations cause an overlook in investigating the important reasons learners may have for such a performance (affective domains).

As such, despite the fact that learner’s motivation has been a popular research area, so far there is a dearth of research in investigating university learner’s motivations toward a project work course. Many researchers (Blumenfeld & Meece, 1988; Lee & Brophy, 1996; Tuan & Chin, 2000) have suggested that motivation research is needed to consider the variations of learners’ motivations within different subject areas. Current motivation research does not provide sufficient information on university learner’s motivations toward a project work course to expound its implications in teaching practices. Specifically, a trend of quantitative research design (Tuan & Chin, 2000) may have limited its exploration of possible variables in explaining university student’s motivations toward a project work course. Accordingly, this study attempts to investigate possible motivational variables university learners have toward a project work course in a qualitative paradigm.

Literature Review

Research in Project Work Course

In most of Taiwanese universities, taking a project work course is the only choice if students refuse to enroll in a practicum. This course is often arranged in the third or the fourth year of a Bachelor degree. Students would obtain a university degree only when they succeed in this course. As a success in the course means everything to all stakeholders, it inevitably attracts considerable research attention. A review of literature shows that a wealth of research has dedicated to understand learning process and problems with an attempt to build up new theoretical constructs in a project work course (Hsiao, Chang & Huang, 2000; Kao & Yen, 2007; Lin, 2010; Wang & Lin, 2001). Recent studies have investigated the effectiveness of new pedagogical designs with technological applications such as the use of internet, blog or e-learning platforms (Ke & Cai, 2008; Lin, Yueh, Murakami & Minoh, 2009; Yen, & Chen, 2006). However, this area of research in a project work course primarily focuses on assessing learning behaviors, skills and problems while the important reasons learners may have for such a performance are often neglected (affective domains).

As such, current scholarship has not been able to inform us on what drives learners' motivations in undertaking this course. This gap should impede a future pedagogical development that values the impact of learners' motivation on teaching practices and their personal growth for a project work course.

The Nature of Project Work Course in Taiwan

The nature of a project work course differs from other learning courses in the regular curriculum because a project work is conducted within a group under a supervisor's supervision for a year. This course is constructed by a problem solving framework, which is not commonly used in a regular curriculum. Jones, Rasmussen and Moffitt (1988) described it as a learner-centered approach. As students begin with an enquiry of open-ended questions, they look for effective ways to solve the problems in a group. Public presentation is used as a means to strengthen learning and analytical skills of students. Evaluation is based on student's performance. As for students of Applied English, the summative assessment would consist of both an English oral presentation and a lengthy English report describing their project work. Despite the fact that this problem solving process is regarded to provide learners with authentic tasks and team working experiences, a requirement of using a great amount

of English and a student initiative problem solving framework as a central part of assessment might be too demanding for a lot of students. Considering the unique nature of the course, the question whether or not learners are of specific course motivations remains open.

Motivation

Motivation is a complicated trait with many definitions, variables and theories. Currently, there is no single theory that encompasses everything. A common notion underlying most of motivation theories is that an individual's behavior is caused by his/her perceived wants, needs, purposes or expectations. In other words, various wants, needs or purposes, expectations of an individual would affect his or her learning behaviors in a certain way. A plethora of motivation research suggests a wild variety of variables that can affect a learner's motivation to learn such as learners' goals, values, self-efficacy, self-concept, control beliefs, learning task and social factors (Dahbany & Mcfadden, 2009 ; Tuan & Chin, 2000; Ushioda, 2010). With a working knowledge of these studies and relevant theories, this study seeks to explore learners' unheard voice on what drives their motivations toward undertaking a project work course.

In terms of learners' motivational patterns, a few studies have found intrinsic and extrinsic motivation theories useful in explaining learner's learning. Intrinsic and extrinsic motivation theories refer to learner's incentives for engagement, which would either come from the activity itself or external benefits obtained. An example of intrinsic motivation for studying is a genuine interest in a specific course while a course credit is another example for extrinsic motivation. Lee and Brophy (1996) classified five patterns of learner's motivation in science learning. These were intrinsically motivated to learn, motivated to learn, intrinsically motivated to learn but inconsistent, not motivated to learn science and negatively motivated. Barlia and Beeth (1999) reclassified these information into three patterns: (1) intrinsically motivated to learn, (2) intrinsically motivated to learn but inconsistent, (3) extrinsically motivated to learn to fulfill an academic requirement.

Also, some of the studies appear to support extrinsic motivation being the most potent variable in explaining a majority of learner's motives in learning. Ellis (1996) and Le (2000) have a similar view that Asian students are more bound to extrinsic

motivation as a result of teacher initiative and a will to success. Wu (1999) studied high school students of physical science and found that a strong extrinsically motivation, that is, gaining good scores, pleasing their parents and having opportunities to conduct lab activities, motivate their learning. Likewise, Tuan & Chin (2000) have a similar finding with students of physical science.

On the other hand, this statement is disapproved by Tran (2007). Tran (2007) reported intrinsic motivation is equally valued by students of English writing in Vietnam. Students are motivated to write by their inspiration and passions. Tran argued that situational specific sources are central to affect learner's desire to write. Tran's study points out an important issue as whether or not student's motivations vary within the nature of a course as learners' motivation is argued to be greatly influenced as a result of a situational sources emerging in the immediate learning environment. Due to little relevant systematic evidence on learner's motivation toward undertaking a project work course, what motivational patterns of learners can be identified and which pattern being the most potent to explain their motivations remains an inquiry.

Method

This study was designed to address what university learner's self-reported level of interest and motivations are for undertaking a project work course.

Participants and procedures

In early January of 2010, 40 junior students of Applied English were chosen purposefully in a University. All participations were voluntary. The reason for my choice of third-year students was that they had studied more than two years in the university and would take a graduate project work course in the coming semester. Accordingly, their familiarity with most of the university programs and resources as well as their concerns over the course demands in a project work may contribute to obtain a more genuine and detailed information of motivations they have toward a project work course.

As advocated by some researchers such as Chamot (1995) and Berdie (1986), open-ended questions would help to leave space for participants to illustrate their points of views in which a wide range of affective factors could be gathered. In this study, participants were given a questionnaire containing one close-ended and one

open-ended question with an attempt to elicit unheard voices and unperceived values associated with learner's motivations and level of interest toward a project work course.

All data were treated confidentially and anonymously, which would make it impossible to link to any individual student participants. In a search for emergent patterns in the data, my analysis was not only based on frequency that they occur but also striking ideas they conveyed.

Results and Discussion

An analysis of collected data in the questionnaire shows that learner's motivations can be explained by five categories, that is, intrinsic motivation, extrinsic motivation, social affiliation, amotivation, and negative motivation. In total, forty participants gave 76 responses. Table one demonstrates the distribution of five categories responded by learners. More than 62% of learners have intrinsic motivation, which is the highest category while social affiliation is the second highest category with 40%. Despite the fact that extrinsic motivation has received 33% of learner's supports, it is still in the third place. It is interesting that 5% of learners described themselves as having no motivations or having negative motivation. The following section would describe what have been identified by learners in each category in details.

Category one refers to an intrinsic motivation learners have toward the course itself. As shown in Table 2, four identified sources of motivation are learner's motivation to learn new knowledge, learner's motivation to build up good character, learner's motivation to acquire research skills and learner's motivation to know their level of achievement after a three year study in a university. Among four factors, factor one is a general intrinsic motivation, which does not have a close link with the course. On the other hand, factors two, three and four are course specific motivations that have a close association with the nature of a project work course. Unlike other courses, a project work course is a research skill training course and learners are often expected to use what they have learnt in a university to complete the course. Therefore, it is not surprising that learners gave highest responses in research skills with 24 responses while identifying a desire to know their level of achievement after a three-year study in a university. Unexpectedly, learners identified that their source of motivation would come from a built-up on character traits during the course, which

seemed to suggest that learners are expecting some personal growth during the course.

Table 3 indicates the distribution of two factors of extrinsic motivation responses by learners. Extrinsic motivation is defined as external benefits learner's perceived they would gain during the course. Two sources of extrinsic motivation identified in category two are learner's motivation to find a job and obtain a university degree. While factor 1 is a common extrinsic motivation, factor 2, obtaining a university degree, can be seen as a course specific motivation due to its close relevance to the nature of a project work course. After all, learners would not be able to graduate if they failed the course. The findings of course specific motivations suggest that learner's motivations are affected within subjects and may not be explained by a vague term of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation.

In the third category, social affiliation is defined as learner's desires to have social interactions among people. It consists of two factors as illustrated in Table 4. To make friends (12.5%) and work in a group (87.5%) are the two main sources of motivations described by learners. The social affiliation motivation matches with course design for a group work. In a way, it implies that learners may be attracted to the specific course design and see it as a potential chance to make social connections with others.

The fourth category, amotivation, is described as no motivation for the course by one learner while the fifth category is stated as possessing a negative motivation toward the course by another learner. Although only 5% of learners described themselves as having amotivation and a negative motivation, how teachers motivate those learners would be an essential issue for pedagogical development. After all, when learners have no motivation or a negative motivation, they are not motivated to achieve in any learning tasks.

In addition to the aforementioned motivational categories, Table 5 reveals a summary of motivational profiles and its association with learner's level of interest. When learner's level of interest in a project work course is asked, 11 people said that they like the course while 17 people had different opinions. It is surprising that there are 12 uncertain people who cannot decide whether or not they like the course.

Among those who liked the course, 25 responses were given by learners indicating intrinsic motivation is the most potent motivational variable to motivate learners who like the course. As social affiliation motivation received eight supporters, it also suggests it may be crucial to motivate some learners who like the course.

People who disliked the course, on the other hand, demonstrated a strong extrinsic

motivation orientation with 9 responses, 5 moderate social affiliation orientation responses and 2 weak intrinsic motivation orientation responses. This finding indicates extrinsic motivation is the most potent motivational variable to motivate learners who dislike the course while social affiliation may be an essential factor to motivate them.

People who are uncertain show a strong intrinsic motivation orientation with 18 responses, a weak social affiliation motivation orientation with 3 responses and a weak extrinsic motivation orientation with 3 responses. This result indicates intrinsic motivation is the most potent motivational variable to motivate learners who are not certain whether or not they like the course.

These outcomes are not unexpected as people who like the course are more likely to have a stronger intrinsic motivation and lower extrinsic motivation than people who dislike the course. However, regardless of learner's interest, social affiliation seems to be regarded as a source of motivation. This finding suggests that social affiliation may serve to arouse some of the learner's genuine interest in undertaking a project work course, particularly for learners who dislike the course.

Ushioda (2010) stated that intrinsic motivation and extrinsic motivation are best seen as correlated. The crucial issue lies in how teachers make learner's motivation internalized and self-determined or externally regulated. Ushioda suggested a creation of social learning environment which promotes learner's participation and autonomy. In this study, intrinsic motivation, extrinsic motivation and social affiliation motivation learners have toward undertaking a project work course support Ushioda's argument (2010). It implies that making the learner's motivation internalized and self-determined or externally regulated may be realized in a social participatory setting as desired by learners undertaking a project work course.

Table 1. Learners' Motivational Profile

Five categories	Intrinsic motivation	Extrinsic motivation	Social affiliation	Amotivation	Negative motivation
Persons (40)	25 (62%)	13 (33%)	16 (40%)	1 (2.5%)	1 (2.5%)
Responses(76)	45 (59.2%)	13 (17.1%)	16 (21.1%)	1 (1.3%)	1 (1.3%)

Table 2. Distribution of Four factors of Intrinsic Motivation Responded by Learners

Four factors of Intrinsic motivation	45 responses (100%)
1.learning new knowledge	18 (40%)
2.building good character traits	2 (4.4%)
3.Acquiring research skills	24 (53.1%)
4.knowing their level of achievement after a three-year study in a university	1 (2.5%)

Table 3. Distribution of Two Factors of Extrinsic Motivation Responded by Learners

Two factors of Extrinsic motivation	13 responses
1.finding a good job	7 (53.8%)
2.obtaining a university degree	6 (46.2%)

Table 4. Distribution of Two Factors of Social Affiliation Responded by Learners

Two factors of Social affiliation	16 responses
making friends	2 (12.5%)
working in a group	14 (87.5%)

Table 5. Distribution of Motivational Categories and Students' Interest

Motivational categories (responses) / Students' Interest (persons)	Intrinsic motivation (45)	Extrinsic motivation (13)	Social affiliation (16)	Amotivation (1)	Negative motivation (1)
Liking (11)	25	1	8	0	0
uncertain (12)	18	3	3	0	0
disliking (17)	2	9	5	1	1

The self-reported nature of the study limits its generalization. If learners did not mention a motivational belief, this did not mean learners would not be motivated to learn for those reasons. Rather, those reasons may not be strong motivational factors for them.

Conclusion

Motivation research is a significant research area dedicated to uncovering the relationship between the learner's thought processes and behaviors. This study provides empirical evidences to support that learner's sources of motivations vary by subject areas. Students undertaking a project work course, for instance, have five categories of motivations, which are only aroused due to its close link with the nature of the subject. Unlike some studies, learners in this study show that intrinsic motivation is also an important source of motivation for most learners who undertake a project work course. Social affiliation motivation, however, deserves more attention because it can serve to arouse genuine interest in undertaking a project work course in some learners, particularly for learners who are not certain of their inclination toward the course.

What has been discussed regarding the correlation between the learner's interest and motivation also has important implications in teaching practices. It is suggested that keeping learner's motivation internally sustained or externally regulated should not only be equally valued but also be manifested in a social participatory circumstances. Replication studies in different settings and stages of learning within various subjects would be useful. A development of a motivation instrument comprising general academic and course specific needs seems worthwhile.

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