EFL Higher Vocational Students' Motivational Regulation and Learner Autonomy in Online Learning Context in China

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Abstract: *Successful online learners must continue to be motivated to learn. The aim of this study was to scrutinize how non-English higher vocational students used learner autonomy and motivational controlling strategies when learning English online. 356 Chinese higher vocational students from a public higher vocational college in the northeast of China served as the study's subjects. A single questionnaire was used to collect information. To control their motivation for online English learning, the participants were discovered to have adopted five different sorts of tactics, however, they used in middle level. Additionally, it was shown that when attending online English lessons, students had a certain amount of learner autonomy. Additionally, in the web-based learning environment, there were significant correlations between students' usage of motivational management tools and their learner autonomy.*

Keywords: Motivational Regulation; Learner Autonomy; Online English learning; Higher Vocational Students.

1. INTRODUCTION

Because of the rapid advancement of information technology, online learning has gained significant attention and recognition. Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic has compelled all universities and colleges in China to transition to online instruction, offering potential and feasibility for studying online foreign language acquisition. Moreover, motivational control techniques and learner autonomy are two distinct concepts that have received considerable research attention in recent decades (Daflizar et al., 2022). The importance of recognizing students' active roles in their studies and implementing effective strategies for acquiring a new language is underscored by the growing enthusiasm for learner-centered approaches to language teaching and the increased utilization of technology-based approaches during the Covid-19 pandemic. In the realm of foreign language learning, motivational regulation tactics refer to conscious efforts done by students to manage their enthusiasm or motivational processes to achieve optimal academic results (Zimmerman, 2013). Conversely, learner autonomy is described as the ability to govern or direct learning of oneself (Benson, 2013), of which it is clearly demonstrated by one's approach to learning and the application of acquired knowledge in broader contexts (Little, 1991). Research indicates that motivational regulation tactics contribute to students becoming more effective learners and enhancing their language competence (Hua & Leng, 2017), while learner autonomy enhances student motivation and language proficiency (Yan, 2020).

In countries like China, here English is not the native language, classroom instruction often serves as the primary means for students to interact with English. However, opportunities to utilize English outside the classroom are limited, as students are immersed in their first language environment. Hence, it becomes increasingly critical to foster autonomous learning and motivation among students in order for them to attain a suitable level of communicative proficiency and thrive as language learners. Various factors can impede effective language acquisition, such as large class sizes, insufficient teacher encouragement for student engagement in classroom activities, and time limitations for English instruction.

Additionally, online English teaching and learning encounter various challenges, particularly in the Chinese context. Online English teaching in China heavily relies on video conferencing or chat-based platforms, which can constrain dynamic engagement between teachers and learners. Besides, it can also hinder the progress of oral communication and auditory comprehension skills due to the limited opportunities for spontaneous conversation and feedback.

While previous studies have explored motivational regulation strategies or learner autonomy individually in the past decade, there has been limited investigation into the interplay and connection between these two concepts. Moreover, studies on this matter in the Chinese setting are scarce. Therefore, the sole primary objective of this study is to address these knowledge gaps by evaluating the utilization of motivational regulation mechanisms and learner autonomy among higher vocational students in an online learning environment.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 English Motivational Regulation Strategies

EFL learners universally experience fluctuations in motivation and commitment due to the dynamic interrelationship among

contextual elements and individual attributes and experiences (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011; Zheng et al., 2018). Moreover, according to the perspective presented by Wolters and Benzon (2013), motivation regulation involves active student engagement to sustain or amplify their motivation. Additionally, in the research conducted by Dörnyei and Ushioda (2011), motivational regulation tactics are employed to foster and amplify student motivation, sustain enduring motivation, and shield it from conflicting or distracting influences. These strategies significantly influence individuals' activity preferences and their dedication of time and effort. Consequently, fostering self-regulated learners is crucial for effective management of motivation. Furthermore, empirical evidence demonstrates that students who utilize motivation-regulation strategies exhibit better control over their effort allocation (Schwinger, Steinmayr, & Spinath, 2009).

Studies on English motivation regulation in China have been uncommon. Li (2017) and Teng and Zhang (2016a, 2016b, 2018) have conducted only a handful of studies examining the usage of motivational regulation among Chinese university EFL learners in traditional learning environments. Moreover, the existing literature predominantly focuses on motivational control among school learners. Moreover, investigations in the realm of higher education settings in China are still in their nascent stages, primarily limited to university students. Notably, despite the substantial population of Chinese higher vocational students, their motivational regulation remains largely unexplored. Furthermore, the mechanisms through which individuals uphold their motivation and involvement in the context of online English study remain unknown. Consequently, there exists a scarcity of research on motivational regulation in the sphere of EFL (English as a Foreign Language) in China, with only a limited number of studies accessible. For example, Teng and Zhang (2016a, 2016b, 2018) researched the motivating regulations of Chinese university EFL learners specifically concerning their writing skills and the impact on their writing course outcomes.

2.2 English Learner Autonomy

The literature on language acquisition and education has placed a strong emphasis on promoting the idea of independent learning during the past three decades (Benson, 2006). One of the rationales behind this emphasis stems from the shift from teacher-centered to student- centered education (Benson, 2013). Furthermore, according to Little (2007), autonomy is fundamentally described by the ability to independently direct one's own learning. Hence, there is a pervasive belief that autonomous learners exhibit higher levels of motivation and productivity (Dickinson, 1995).

However, despite the consensus that independent learners should have control over every aspect of their education, studies such as Scharle and Szabó (2000) and Benson (2006) have demonstrated that not all language learners exhibit equal levels of autonomy. Indeed, autonomy can manifest in different degrees. For instance, Nunan (1997) delineated five stages that encompass the adoption of learner autonomy: cognizance, participation, intrusion, conception, and transcendence. Considering the utmost level, students are able to establish connections between the material learned in class and the outside world, commencing with the awareness stage where they recognize their preferred learning styles and strategies. Additionally, Benson (2001) proposed that autonomy encompasses three interrelated levels of control, including learning processes, cognitive processes, and management. In a similar vein, Littlewood (1996) acknowledged the existence of varied levels of autonomy across three domains: communication, knowledge, and personal upbringing in life. Furthermore, Littlewood (1999) drew a discrepancy between the two types of autonomy: proactive and reactive, with proactive autonomy is most frequently conceptualized by Western researchers and educators, in which learners have control over both the direction and content of their activities. On the other hand, reactive autonomy represents the initial level of autonomy, wherein learners take control of their actions once the direction has been defined.

Interestingly, promoting learner autonomy was identified as one of the top ten motivational techniques in Dornyei and Csizér's (1998) study, which examined the significance and usage of 51 motivational strategies among 200 English teachers in Hungary. Building on this research, Yang (1998) conducted a study aimed at helping students develop autonomy through strategy training. The study involved university students who were given the responsibility of determining their own competency goals and creating personalized study programs. Simultaneously, the researcher offered support by demonstrating effective learning techniques throughout the study. Findings indicated that learners were initially inclined to establish objectives that were impractical and held some misconceptions about the proper implementation of learning strategies.

Hence, the primary goal of this research is to investigate the use of motivation regulation strategies in English language learning and assess the level of learner autonomy among Chinese EFL higher vocational students in an e-learning setting. Furthermore, the study seeks to investigate the interplay between these two factors, aiming to bridge the existing research gap in the realm of foreign language learning and offer valuable insights for future endeavors in training and intervention research concerning motivation regulation strategies.

3. METHODS

3.1 Participants

The participants in this study comprised 356 higher vocational students from a single higher vocational and technical institute in China. Among the cohort of participants, there were 145 females and 211 males, including 220 freshmen students and 136 sophomore students. Furthermore, 217 students were majoring in science, while 139 were pursuing degrees in the liberal arts. The Raosoft Sample Size Calculator was utilized to determine the sample size for participant selection.

3.2 Research Instruments

This research employed two distinct questionnaires for data collection. Firstly, the Online English Motivational Regulation Strategies Questionnaire (OEMRSQ) was utilized to assess the frequency of students' utilization of motivational regulation strategies when acquiring English online. The questionnaire was based on the Motivational Regulation Strategies Questionnaire (MRSQ) developed by Wolter and Benson (2013). In this study, modifications were made to the MRSQ, including the incorporation of a "4-point Likert scale" ranging from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree." The OEMRSQ consisted of 21 items and was divided into five sub-scales.

Additionally, an adjusted version of the questionnaire which was originally established by Barnard et al. (2009), was employed to assess the extent of learner autonomy among students in the milieu of online English learning. Four out of the six sections from the original questionnaire were included in this investigation. Participants were instructed to rate their responses on a four-point scale, using the following rating system: 1 for "strongly disagree," 2 for "disagree," 3 for "agree," and 4 for "strongly agree.

3.3 Data Collection and Analysis

Participants who consented to take part in this research were given two sets of questionnaires. Prior to distributing the questionnaires, participants were briefed on the study's objectives and instructed to provide truthful responses. The goal was to gather valuable insights into the utilization of motivational regulation strategies by students and their involvement in autonomous language learning.

The information attained from this survey was evaluated and analyzed using SPSS, a statistical software package, which facilitated the examination of both descriptive and inferential statistics. Descriptive statistics namely mean scores, percentages, and standard deviations were utilized as appropriate, while the Spearman Correlation was employed to explore the connection between students' utilization of motivation regulation strategies and their level of learner autonomy when studying English online.

4. RESULTS

4.1 Students' Usage of Motivational Regulation Strategies

Table 1 indicates how participants' motivational regulation tactics were used overall when studying English online. Oxford (1990) divided the extent to which the approaches were employed into three categories: high (3.5-5.0), medium (2.5-3.4), and low (1.0-2.4).

Table 1: Overall Usage of Motivational Regulation Strategies

Indicators	Mean	Interpretation	Rank
1. Regulation of value	3.36	Agree	1
2. Regulation of performance goals	3.21	Agree	4
3. Self-consequating	3.20	Agree	5
4. Regulation of situational interest	3.24	Agree	3
5. Regulation of mastery goals	3.27	Agree	2
Composite Mean	3.26	Agree	

Participants demonstrated a moderate level of utilization across all five motivational regulation strategies in their online English learning, as indicated in Table 1, with a composite mean value of 3.26. Regulation of value strategies was placed first with a mean score of 3.36, followed by regulation of mastery objectives strategies (M=3.27) and regulation of situational interest (M=3.24) in second and third place, respectively. Meanwhile, the regulation of performance goals approach came in fourth place with a mean score of 3.21, while the self-consequating method came in last with a mean score of 3.20.

Upon examining the strategies related to the regulation of value (refer to Table 2), the highest score was obtained by the statement -- While learning English online, I try to connect the learning knowledge to my personal interests (M=3.42). Following closely behind, the statement-- I make great efforts to make it seem more useful by relating it to what I want to do in my life,

ranked second (M=3.40), while the item -- I tell myself that it is crucial to do so because I will need it in the future for my work ranked third (M=3.36). The item -- I make an effort to tie studying English online to enjoyable activities, like playing online games ranked the lowest (M=3.28).

Table 2: Students' Usage of Regulation of Value Strategies

Indicators	Mean	Interpretation	Rank
I try to make English learning seem more useful by relating it to what I want to do in my life when learning English online.	3.40	Agree	2
I make an effort to relate what I'm learning to my personal interests when learning English online.	3.42	Agree	1
I try to connect English learning with something I like (such as using some online games) in online English learning.	3.28	Agree	4
I tell myself that it is important to learn English because I will need it later in my future work when learning English online.	3.36	Agree	3
Composite Mean	3.36	Agree	

In terms of self-consequating strategies (refer to Table 3), the statement-- I tell myself to give me a reward when I finish learning English online had the lowest ranking with a medium frequency (M=3.11).

Table 3: Students' Usage of Self-consequating Strategies

Indicators	Mean	Interpretation	Rank
I promise myself some kind of a reward if I get my English learning done online English learning.	3.11	Agree	4
I make a deal with myself that if I get a certain amount of the work done, I can do something fun afterward in online English learning.	3.26	Agree	2
I set a goal for how much I needed to study and promise myself a reward if I reach that goal in online English learning.	3.13	Agree	3
I promise myself I can do something I want later if I finish the assigned online English tasks now.	3.28	Agree	1
Composite Mean	3.20	Agree	

4.2 Students' Level of Autonomy

The percentages of students' replies are shown in Table 4 on their capacity for independent study while taking online English courses. As shown in the table, goal setting and task strategies both ranked in first place with the same mean value of 3.21. It is followed by help-seeking skills (M=3.16). On the other hand, self-evaluation is in the last place among all the indicators (M=3.10).

Table 4: Overall Level of Learner Autonomy

Indicators	Mean	Interpretation	Rank
1. Goal setting	3.21	Agree	1.5
2. Task strategies	3.21	Agree	1.5
3. Help-seeking	3.16	Agree	3
4. Self-evaluation	3.10	Agree	4
Composite Mean	3.17	Agree	

4.3 Correlations between Students' Motivational Regulation Strategy Use and Learner Autonomy

A Spearman Correlation analysis was steered to analyze the correlation between students' motivational regulation strategy use and their autonomous learning when studying English online. The findings revealed a strong relationship (p 0.001) between students' usage of motivational management tools and their autonomy in their online English learning.

Table 5: Correlation Between Motivational Regulation Strategies and Learner Autonomy

Regulation of value	rho-value	p-value	Interpretation
Goal setting	.408**	<.001	Highly Significant
Task strategies	.421**	<.001	Highly Significant
Help-seeking	.425**	<.001	Highly Significant
Self-evaluation	.458**	<.001	Highly Significant
Regulation of performance goals			
Goal setting	.454**	<.001	Highly Significant
Task strategies	.492**	<.001	Highly Significant
Help-seeking	.494**	<.001	Highly Significant
Self-evaluation	.491**	<.001	Highly Significant
Self-consequating			
Goal setting	.518**	<.001	Highly Significant
Task strategies	.528**	<.001	Highly Significant
Help-seeking	.493**	<.001	Highly Significant
Self-evaluation	.544**	<.001	Highly Significant
Regulation of situational interest			
Goal setting	.490**	<.001	Highly Significant
Task strategies	.518**	<.001	Highly Significant
Help-seeking	.513**	<.001	Highly Significant
Self-evaluation	.511**	<.001	Highly Significant
Regulation of mastery goals			
Goal setting	.449**	<.001	Highly Significant
Task strategies	.480**	<.001	Highly Significant
Help-seeking	.439**	<.001	Highly Significant
Self-evaluation	.473**	<.001	Highly Significant

Legend: Significant at p-value < 0.01.

5. DISCUSSION

The results of the present study indicated that Chinese higher vocational college learners demonstrated a high preference for employing this strategy most frequently to control their motivation and interests when they achieved the objectives and goals of online English learning. This indicates that Chinese higher vocational college students prefer to use this strategy most frequently to regulate their motivation and interest when they accomplished the online English learning objectives and goals. Wolters (1999) defined the strategy of regulation of value as learners' proactive engagement in the building of greater enjoyment learning enterprises that are beneficial to them. For instance, students strive to enhance their conversational skills in the target language with the aim of securing better job opportunities in their future careers. This result is consistent with Li's (2017) findings, which claimed that Chinese university students were subject to high levels of regulation of value strategies. Due to the following two factors, Chinese higher vocational students may frequently employ regulation of value tactics when learning English online. On the opposite hand, China places a great value on English competence, especially in the employment sector. Many higher vocational students understand that honing their English abilities can improve their chances of landing a job in the future. To stay motivated and committed to their online English learning, they must use this tactic. Chinese higher vocational students, on the other side, frequently encounter academic pressure and may regard English competence as a tool to improve academic performance or obtain better grades. They may use this technique to keep themselves motivated and achieve successful learning results by reminding themselves of the advantages of online English learning.

In contrast, higher vocational students who completed online English courses employed the self-consequating method the least. This technique, according to Li (2017), implies that students rely on rewards from outside sources to stimulate their study. The lowest mean value of this technique in Table 1 compared to other domains showed that higher vocational college students in China do not enjoy utilizing this strategy to maintain their learning motivation in an online learning realm. The research findings of Wolters (1999) are not entirely supported by this conclusion, though. The survey objects may have contributed to the variations in the research findings. While Wolters (1999) focused on middle school students as research subjects, this study examined higher vocational college students. The participants are adults with somewhat mature working and thinking styles. To retain their interest in studying English, individuals are therefore more likely to encourage or stimulate their internal motivation than to seek out external rewards. As a result, this tactic is rarely used by higher vocational college students very often.

The findings of this research paper indicated that the participants exhibited varying levels of learner autonomy, allowing them to assume responsibility for their online English studies. Goal-setting and task strategies were the ones that were most frequently employed, therefore participants in this study were able to create goals, develop plans, and select some effective learning techniques for their online English study. These findings align with previous research conducted in ESL or EFL environments (Üstünlüolu, 2009; Yldrm, 2008). The student's maturity and age, which give them the self-assurance to engage in these autonomy-related activities, may be responsible for their good perceptions of their talents. Therefore, the instructor has to encourage more autonomy-related activities in the online classroom to support these skills.

A substantial relationship between students' usage of motivational management methods and their learner autonomy in a web-based learning environment was also found, according to statistical analyses of the data. These findings support the hypothesis that, for Chinese higher vocational students, learner autonomy will increase with the increased use of motivation control tools. Students who exhibit significant learner autonomy are also likely to use more motivation control tactics to aid in English language acquisition. These findings are consistent with those made in the traditional classroom by several Chinese researchers, like Lv (2020) and Wang (2021), who discovered a favorable and significant association between students' utilization of motivational management tools and their autonomy.

6. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This study enriches the limited body of research examining the utilization of motivational regulation strategies and learner autonomy among Chinese EFL higher vocational students in online learning environments. Additionally, this study emphasized the connection between these two ideas, which hasn't gotten much scholarly attention. The findings showed that Chinese EFL students used all five motivational regulation strategies-regulation of value, performance goals, self-consequential, situational interest, and mastery objectives-to a medium extent in their online English learning. Additionally, it was discovered that the study's participants had autonomy as English language learners when they studied the language online. The frequency of particular English learner autonomy setting goals and task techniques is highest among them. Help-seeking comes next, and then self-evaluation comes last. This demonstrates that, even though students in higher vocational institutions in China can, to a certain extent, be in charge of their education when they participate in online learning, the autonomy of English language learners as a whole need to be increased.

The findings also revealed a strong relationship linking students' usage of motivational control tactics and their assessments of their autonomy in learning as well as between these strategies and learner autonomy in an online learning environment. These results corroborate prior research on the relationship between the two variables and add to the body of knowledge, notably on the topic of motivational control mechanisms as well as the degree of learner autonomy among EFL students.

The current study's conclusions have some useful pedagogical ramifications for EFL teaching and learning. Educators must support learners in formulating realistic learning goals and implementing effective action plans. Because of their diverse English levels, students should no longer be constrained by the same instructional progress and a single teaching subject when learning English independently online. Instead, they should select the most appropriate learning material based on their proficiency in English, their goals, their habits, and their interests. They should also assess their learning progress, set their own learning goals, and develop their distinctive learning styles. In addition, teachers' organizing and guiding roles should be fully utilized to help students to develop their all-around English proficiency. In other words, supervisors can help students not only with their academics but also with their drive to learn English online.

Students in higher vocational and technical colleges in China should also be aware that studying English is challenging, that there may be several obstacles and interferences, and that they must continually alter their learning motivation. To boost their internal drive for studying, students must build a proper English learning value. Students should have a clear understanding of the goal of learning English rather than relying solely on exam results. Additionally, students should be aware that the high-quality English talents currently required in society are individuals who can solve problems through the use of English. Students should be motivated to change their consciousness during the learning process so they can intentionally learn English. It is vital to intentionally employ various motivation regulation tactics to jointly sustain learning motivation, boost the excitement for learning, and encourage individuals to learn freely to assure the learning effect when there is a lack of learning motivation.

7. LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

Some of the conversations are not detailed enough because of the author's limited research experience, and the following problems are brought up for additional discussion. The study's sample is not diverse enough to start. Only first- and second-year students from one public institution in China who are majoring in something other than English were chosen as the study's research subjects. As a result, they fall short of accurately capturing the extent of English learner autonomy and the usage of motivation regulation mechanisms for English learning among Chinese EFL students in the higher vocational stage. Second, because this study is solely horizontal in nature, it is unable to capture the dynamic amount of student autonomy, motivational

regulation mechanisms for learning English, and interaction between the two during online instruction. Future studies will have the capability to dynamically keep an eye on how Chinese EFL students are learning English and completely comprehend how the relationship linking learner autonomy and learner motivation management mechanisms is developing and changing.

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