

A Study on the Relationship between Motivation and Interpretation Competence of English Majors

Shanshan Tu

Yaping Zhou

Foreign Languages School
Zhejiang Ocean University
Zhejiang Province
China

Abstract

In order to learn about the relationship between students' motivation and their interpretation competence, a study is conducted among the English majors in Zhejiang Ocean University according to Gardner's motivation theory. The findings show that English majors in Zhejiang Ocean University are conscious of the great importance of mastering the interpretation skills, but their attitudes towards their existing interpretation level is negative. Most of them believe that motivation does have great impact on their learning and there is positive correlation between motivation and their interpretation competence. In the end, some suggestions on how to improve students' motivation and interpretation competence are put forward from the teachers' and the students' perspectives.

Keywords: motivation, English majors, interpretation competence

Introduction

With the development of science and economy, interpretation becomes more and more important in international cooperation and communication. The new era comes up with more requirements for English majors. The requirements of the syllabus state clearly that the students should not only master the English knowledge, but also possess the ability to communicate freely in English. However, due to their narrow professional knowledge and limited professional terminology, some students still can't catch what they hear or express themselves clearly after four years' study of English. The current status of English majors is not so satisfactory in China because of their poor comprehensive quality, especially their interpretation competence. The reasons why some of English majors acquire relatively low spoken English competence are diverse and multiple. But one main factor, they would mention, is motivation. Motivation is considered to be a key feature in the success of language learning. Gardner's motivation theory plays an important role in the academic world. According to him, instrumental motivation and integrative motivation are regarded as the main motivation types. Although many researches have been done on motivation, there is no agreement on the effect of motivation. In order to learn about the English majors' motivation and the relationship between students' motivation and their interpretation competence, we conducted a study among the English major students in Zhejiang Ocean University according to Gardner's motivation theory.

1. Literature Review

1.1 Definition of Motivation

Motivation is regarded as a key factor which plays an important role in language learning. Gardner (1985:38) regards motivation as "the effort plus desire to achieve the goal of learning the language plus favorable attitudes toward learning the language". It means that motivation is the combination of the aspiration to achieve the goal or goals of learning plus positive attitudes towards learning. Marion Williams & Robert L. Burden (2000) present a definition of motivation from a cognitive aspect, which really suits for social constructive framework. They also construe motivation as 1) a state of cognitive and emotional arousal; 2) which results in action towards conscious decision; 3) which keeps the sustained intellectual and/or physical effort; 4) in order to achieve the goal or (goals) set previously.

Masgoret and Gardner (2003) define motivation as the sum of motivational intensity, desire to learn the target language, and attitude toward learning the target language. These concepts are closely related to the actual amount of effort, the desire to attain a high and satisfactory level of competence, and the effect experienced while learning the language. Zoltan Dörnyei (2012) states that 'motivation' is one of the most important concepts in psychology as motivation theories attempt to explain nothing less than why humans behave and think as they do. The notion is so important in language that teachers and students always use it to explain what causes success and failure in learning. Zoltan Dörnyei thinks that without sufficient motivation, even individuals with the most remarkable abilities cannot accomplish long-term goals. Appropriate curricula and good teaching cannot ensure students' achievement either.

1.2 Classification of Motivation

David Paul Ausubel says that there are three aspects of achievement motivation which is regarded to be the driving force. It includes three components. The first one is cognitive motivation, which is made up of knowledge, skills and the ability of finding problems and solving problems. It can be seen from one's curiosity, thirst for knowledge, exploration, and other psychological factors. The second one is self-enhancement motivation, which is the way to win the corresponding position such as academic achievements. It can be shown from one's self-esteem, pride, self-confidence, a sense of competence and other psychological factors. The third one is affiliated motivation, by which way students can win praise and recognition from parents, teachers and his classmates through improving learning. It is also regarded as a sense of dependency. These three driving forces in the learning activities are not fixed. They will be changed with the student's age, gender, personality traits, family and cultural background. Gardner and Lambert (1972) describe the integrative motivation as the interest in learning the language with the purpose to talk or communicate with members in the second language community. It is characterized by those who learn the second language so as to identify themselves with the language speaking group and ultimately join it. They also regard instrumental motivation as a motivation to get some advantages by learning another language. A learner with instrumental motivation is more likely to get a reward.

Deci and Ryan (1985) put forward intrinsic and extrinsic motivation theory. More specially, intrinsic motivation refers to the motivation to engage in an activity with a feeling of happiness and satisfactory. Extrinsically motivated behaviors mean those actions that are carried out to achieve some instrumental desire, such as earning a reward or avoiding a punishment. According to Williams & Burden (2000), motivation can be intrinsic, that is, the learner does something because he or she enjoys the act of doing it. Alternatively, it can be extrinsic, in other words, the purpose of the learner to engage in an activity is to achieve other ends. They think that if the learner attaches a high value to the outcome of an activity, it is more likely for the learner to be spirited and motivated to perform it.

1.3 Related Studies on Motivation

Motivation is known as one of the factors influencing the success or failure in English learning. Different scholars hold different ideas. Vivian Cook (1996) pointed out that high motivation is an important part that causes successful learning. At the same time, successful learning may cause high motivation. William Littlewood (2000) analyzes that motivated students would be more eager and enthusiastic to devote the time required to language learning. Moreover, having a specific goal and desire to learn a language aids students to try their best in learning and helps them maintain their motivation. Zoltan Dörnyei (2012) made a research in Canadian situation where there was a particular balance between the two official languages, English and French. He found that an instrumental motivation concerned with future careers was very powerful. While an integrative motivation was also relevant, it was not, as in Canada, related to actual contact with native groups but to general attitudes and stereotypes and it became more important as the learners advanced in the language. Quiet a few Chinese scholars have studied motivation and carried out some researches. Hao Mei and Hao Ruoping (2001) found a positive correlation between achievement motivation and students' success in English learning. Ma Guanghui (2005) showed that the motivation, as a psychological tendency, may not directly influence the process of English learning, but it does have an impact on English learning.

1.4 Interpretation Situation in China

Wei and Zhang (2009) show us in an interview that 90% of English major students think that their knowledge structure of interpretation is single. Besides, they think their narrow professional knowledge and lack of professional terminology results in their low level of interpretation.

Luo, Huang and Xu (2008) make a research for non-English majors by describing their status, pressing problems, feasibility and appropriate approaches. It attempts to exploit the potential of educational resource and explore effective ways to improve interpretation competence of non-English majors which contribute to the teaching of interpretation. Guo, Liu and Deng (2003) point out that in order to adapt to the quick development and reform of the outside world and the social-economy, universities and colleges need to bring up and train the talents with multi-abilities. Moreover, they should also have many kinds of preconditions, because our society has already regarded the interpreting ability as the symbolic characteristic of the talents with multi-abilities.

2. The Study

2.1 Objectives and Research Questions

The study was conducted to measure the relationship between motivation and interpretation competence. The variables discussed in this paper are students' motivation in interpretation, the interpretation level they had, integrative, instrumental, motivational intensity, the compulsory subjects they think that are helpful. To measure these variables, we modified some questions to constitute a questionnaire. The study is to address the following questions.

- 1) Whether or not students' motivation in learning will influence their interpretation competence?
- 2) Whether students are instrumental-oriented or integrative-oriented towards interpretation learning?
- 3) What kind of motivation is good for students' learning?
- 4) Which specialized course can enhance their interpretation competence?
- 5) What kind of measures do students take to improve their interpretation competence?

2.2 Subjects

The subjects in this study are 31 English major seniors in Zhejiang Ocean University. Most of them are girls. Their ages range from 20 to 23 and most of them are 22. They started learning English in primary school. They all have taken the advanced interpretation course. All of them respond to the questionnaire cautiously and responsibly. Considering the above aspects, on the whole, the subjects may represent the English majors' interpretation competence in this school.

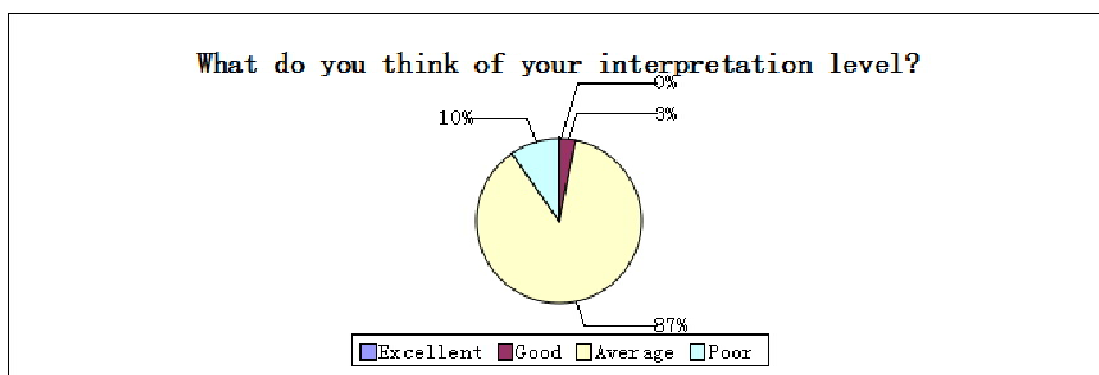
2.3 Instruments

This study adopts three devices---a questionnaire, a transcript and an interview. The questionnaire is used for students to express and verify the research questions. It includes two parts. The first part of the questionnaire is the background information. The second part is made up of 8 questions for students to choose or answer. A transcript of the final interpretation exam is collected from their teacher as the most forceful and valuable material to learn about the students' interpretation ability. An interview is made after knowing their results of the final interpretation exam. 10 interviewees whose interpretation levels are on average or above average are chosen.

2.4 Results

2.4.1 About the Students' Interpretation Competence

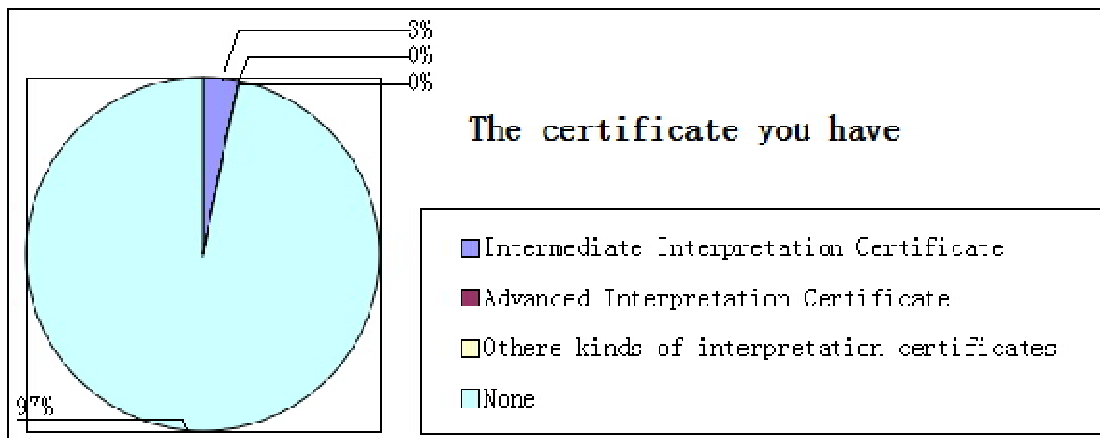
Chart 1: Statistics about the Students' Interpretation Competence



From Chart 1, it can be seen that 27 students (87%) perceive their interpretation level to be average while 3 students (10%) have rated themselves to be poor in interpretation and only 1 student (3%) has perceived his interpretation level to be good.

Therefore, most of the English majors evaluate their interpretation level as average by themselves. It means that the senior English major students can clearly realize that the general level of their interpretation is not so high and they are not so confident about their interpretation competence, which can be proved by the certificates they have got because only 3% students have got the Intermediate Interpretation Certificate.

Chart 2: Statistics about the Certificate the Students Have Got



However, the students’ final scores of the interpretation course show that 24 students have got the scores above 70 points which indicate that the general level was above average. The students’ interpretation level on the exam seems higher than what they have perceived. This result may further confirm the students’ lack of confidence in the interpretation competence they have.

2.4.2 About the General Pattern of Students’ Motivation

Chart 3: Statistics about the Students’ Motivation

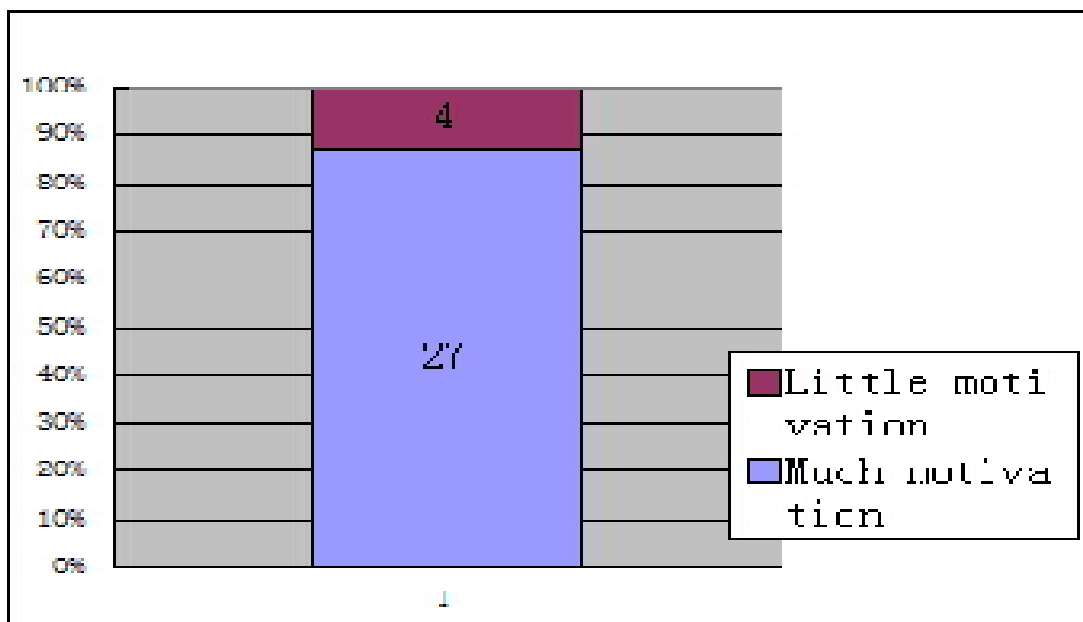
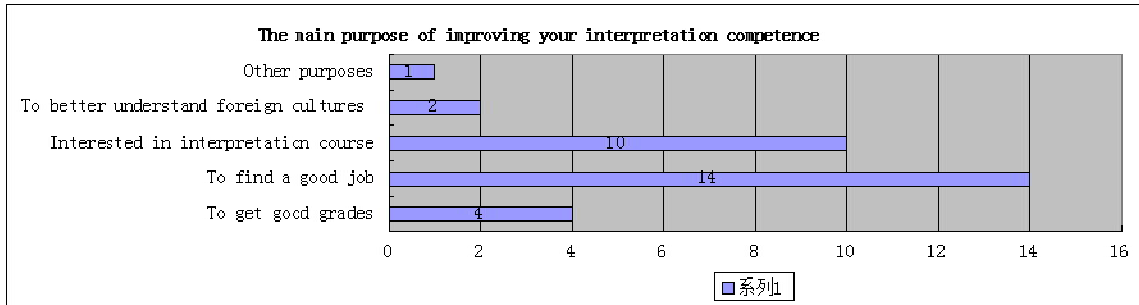


Chart 3 shows that nearly 90% students definitely have ambition to improve their interpretation competence, which indicates that most students can realize the importance of learning interpretation and are eager to enhance their interpretation competence. However, there are still a small number of students who ignore the significance of interpretation and they think it doesn’t matter whether their interpretation competence is poor or not.

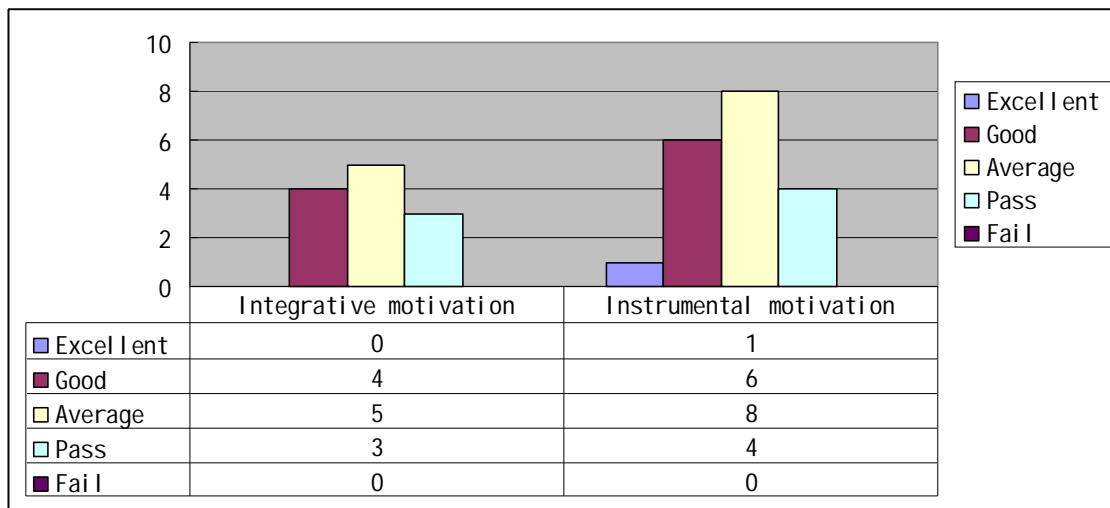
Chart 4: Statistics about the Students’ Improving Interpretation Competence



Among 31 students, 14 students think that to find a good job is the main motivation of improving their interpretation competence and only 10 students are really interested in the interpretation course, which show that there are more instrumental-motivated students.

2.4.3 About the Relationship between Motivation and Interpretation Competence

Chart 5: The Relationship between Motivation and Interpretation Competence



(Excellent: > 90; Good: 80-90; Average: 70-80; Pass: 60-70; Fail: <60)

In all the level except “Fail”, the number of students who perceive to have instrumental motivation is larger than that of students who have integrative motivation.

From Chart 5, when we examine the relationship between motivation and interpretation competence, we can clearly see that the students with instrumental motivation have performed better than those with integrative motivation in the interpretation final examination.

3. Major Findings

(1) Students’ motivation in learning will influence their interpretation competence.

From the study, most of the students believe that motivation has great impact on their learning and there is positive correlation between motivation and their interpretation competence. There are a large number of students who hold a positive attitude towards learning interpretation. It denotes that they are willing to learn interpretation and they are motivated to overcome the difficulties by themselves. What the following two interviewees said is a good case in point:

“Motivation is just like a hand that will push you go ahead. It can identify your goals and make you improve your efficiency of learning. In my circles of friend, people who show great interest in learning all get good grades. But people with too much motivation can’t get good results.”

“Motivation is very important for English majors because we may work in a foreign company in the future; but to those who do not want to work with foreigners, it’s OK if you have a poor interpretation competence.”

(2) Students are more instrumental-oriented than integrative-oriented towards interpretation learning.

From the analysis of the interview, the largest number of students wants to improve their interpretation competence because they want to find a good job. This result is similar to the result from the study done by Zhou Wei (2012) in her university which says that only 20% of the students take the interpretation course out of interest and most of the students take the course just for the sake of having a better job. As the job-hunting is both hard and fierce in our modern society, it is reasonable for students to make this choice, especially to those undergraduate students. To get good grades and to better understand foreign cultures are regarded as important reasons for improving students' interpretation competence. "To get good grades" is for practical use. It is well known that students need to pass exams, and then they can have qualification to get the graduation certificate. As for "to understand foreign cultures better", some English majors want to get some background information so that they can communicate with foreigners appropriately and decently. The study shows that most of the English majors are instrumentally motivated, but their integrative motivation toward learning English is still high. Many students combine their interpretation competence into their future jobs. They learn interpretation not just for tasks but also for development. Most of the students want to improve their interpretation competence not only because they are interested in it. It is a voluntary act driven by internal dynamics.

(3) Instrumental motivation is also good for students' learning.

The study has portrayed a picture which establishes that English major students are mainly instrumentally motivated, but their integrative motivation is also high. The data clearly show that students who are instrumentally motivated do better in their study than those who are integratively motivated.

(4) Not a single course enhances their interpretation competence.

According to the data and the answers collected in the questionnaire and the interview, most of the English majors clearly know the importance of having high interpretation competence. However, their perceived interpretation level is generally lower than that reflected in their final interpretation exam. One reason for this result may come from the students' low self-confidence. The second reason may be that there are a series of major courses such as Advanced English Course, Oral English, Advanced Audio-Visual Course, and so on. The last reason may be the de-motivating factors inside and outside the class. Firstly, English majors have a few opportunities to apply English or to communicate with English native speakers; Secondly, they are not encouraged to speak English and they feel less confident in doing interpretation; Thirdly, they do not have enough chance to acquire interpretation skills, especially to learn the most favored language skills as listening and speaking; Finally, they have to spend a lot of time and effort learning the language and its grammar. However, it can not be denied that Advanced Interpretation Course and Advanced English Course do help a lot according to the study. Therefore, the English majors' interpretation competence can not be cultivated only by one course alone.

(5) Students usually take different measures to improve their interpretation competence.

According to the interview, different students choose different ways to improve their interpretation competence. Some students read various kinds of books. Some students volunteer as an English interpreter. Some students practice their oral English with friends. A small number of students also take part-time jobs in a foreign company. The rest students aim at getting different kinds of certificates. When asked about what measures they usually take to improve their interpretation competence, they give the following answers.

"I do nothing special except that I finish my homework carefully, listen to the radio every day and sometimes go to the English Club to practice my spoken English. Of course, I get my final exams well prepared."

"I set goals every day, and achieve them one by one. And I think interest is the best teacher. I am motivated to get the Intermediate Interpretation Certificate because I am interested in it. And as for me, encouragement from my parents is also important on my way to success."

4. Implications for Future Teaching

4.1 For Students

For students, there are a variety of ways and activities to improve their interpretation competence. The students should believe that they need motivation to help them learn English interpretation. Setting up clear goals and establishing self-confidence help students know what they should do and how to move on. Effective working method and good learning habits contribute to the success of interpretation learning, for it leads students to the right direction.

- (1) Students should set clear goals in English learning. They can separate the large goal into several small ones and achieve the goals one by one or find the direct way to the ultimate goal and achieve the goal from the easy one to the difficult one.
- (2) Students should have self-confidence, self-esteem and pride. In other words, students should have consciousness to train themselves to ask questions, to find problems, and to solve the problems.
- (3) Students should work in pairs, work with partners and work with the whole class. In this way, students can solve problems together and share the experience in learning which makes learning easier.
- (4) Students should keep strong interest in learning English. As the old saying goes that interest is the best teacher, interest determines students to learn English well and also they will be happy and efficient to learn English and obtain good effect of learning English.
- (5) Students should master study method and form good learning habits. The correct learning methods and good learning habits are important guarantees of the best effect.

4.2 For Teachers

For teachers, as an organizer or leader in teaching, teachers have responsibilities to increase their students' inclination to perform willingly and actively in English learning. At the same time, teachers should try their best to make students realize that knowledge is valuable. During the class, teachers should try to improve the charm of English and help students realize the great importance of English.

- (1) Teachers should realize students' needs and try to satisfy them. Focus students' attention and arouse students' curiosity which can cultivate their interest in improving interpretation competence.
- (2) Teachers should create a student-oriented environment and organize various kinds of interesting activities in the whole class, in groups or in pairs. They can also apply new and effective techniques to promote students' intrinsic motivation.
- (3) Teachers should make efforts to provide more opportunities for students to experience the success and to talk with foreigners. Some students complain that interpretation English class is so boring and the learning atmosphere is not so good in university. It certainly decreases their motivation. And gradually they lose interest in interpretation. The more conditions students have to use their interpretation competence, the more likely they are to keep their passion towards interpretation.
- (4) The teacher must give students high expectation and use rewards appropriately. Using outward power to stimulate students' motivation is an important part of extrinsic motivation theory.

Conclusion

The above study shows that most of the English majors clearly know the importance of mastering high interpretation competence. Most students believe that motivation has great impact on their learning and there is positive correlation between motivation and their interpretation competence. Students with instrumental motivation can also perform well and even better in their study than the integrative-motivated ones. There are some limitations of this study. Firstly, the questionnaire in this research is not comprehensive enough, that is, the research is unable to cover all aspects of motivation variables. Secondly, the larger the sample size is, the more reliable the research will be. Therefore, the number of valid questionnaires is not enough. Thirdly, judging seniors' interpretation competence according to their marks in the final exam of advanced interpretation course is too single. Last but not least, seniors in Foreign Languages School can not represent the interpretation level of all the English majors. It is expected that the findings obtained in the study can be helpful for both English teachers and English majors and the suggestions offered in the paper can be a contribution to the improvement of interpretation competence.

References

- Cook, V. (1996). *Second language learning and language teaching*. Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press.
- Deci, E. L. & Ryan, R. M. (1985). *Intrinsic motivation and self-determination in human behavior*. New York: Plenum Press.
- Dörnyei, Z. (2012). *Motivation in language learning*. Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press.
- Gardner, R. C. & Lambert, W. (1972). *Attitudes and motivation in second language learning*. New York: Newbury House.
- Gardner, R. C. (1985). *Social psychology and language learning: the role of attitudes and motivation*. London: Edward Arnold.
- Guo, Houwen, Liu, Lunhao & Deng, Jianhui. (2003). On the symbolic characteristics of the talents of Foreign Languages with multi-abilities. *Journal of Gannan Teachers College*.(5):50-51.
- Hao, Mei & Hao, Ruoping. (2001). Research on the relationship between English achievement and achievement motivation as well as anxiety state: A case study. *Foreign Language Teaching and Research (bimonthly)*. 33(2):32-36.
- Littlewood, W. (2000). *Foreign and Second Language Learning*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Luo, Xuanmin, Huang, Qin & Xu, Lina. (2008). A probe into the teaching of interpretation for non-English majors. *Foreign Language World*. (5): 75-83.
- Ma, Guang-hui. (2005). The effects of motivation and effort on foreign language achievement. *Journal of PLA University of Foreign Languages*. 28(4): 37-41.
- Masgoret, A. M. & Gardner, R. C. (2003). Attitudes, motivation and second language learning: A meta-analysis of studies conducted by Gardner and Associates. *Language Learning*. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/1467-9922.00212> 2003.6.03
- Wei, Xiaohong & Zhang, Liping. (2009). A report of the investigation on the interpretation competence of business English students. *Journal of Handan College*. 19(4): 117-121.
- Williams, M. & Burden, R. L. (2000). *Psychology for language teachers*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Zhou, Wei. (2012). An investigation on the interpretation study of English major students. *Journal of Higher Correspondence Education (Philosophy and Social Sciences)*. 25(1):58-59.