

Original Paper

A Critique of Tin's (2013) "Exploring the Development of 'Interest' in Learning English as a Foreign/Second Language"

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Abstract

This paper critiques the research article "Exploring the Development of 'Interest' in Learning English as a Foreign/Second Language" written by Tan Bee Tin (2013) and mainly analyzes its strengths and weaknesses. Tin (2013) argued that the previous notions for motivation in foreign/ second language learning were considered as inadequate and claimed a new concept from a cognitive perspective. This review paper recognizes the problems Tin (2013) put forward in previous studies on learning interests, but points out that the solutions she described in her research article cannot well fill the gap.

Keywords

critique, motivation, interest, English learning

1. Introduction

This paper comments on the research article "Exploring the Development of 'Interest' in Learning English as a Foreign/Second Language" written by Tan Bee Tin (2013), which proposes "a new concept of interest development in learning English" and mainly explores "situational features that trigger interest in learning English" (p. 129). Tin (2013) points out that in the previous studies, the concept of motivation in foreign/second language learning seems to be inadequate in various contexts, which brings the emergence of a variety of substitute notions for motivation such as "investment" (Norton, 2000; Peirce, 1995), "desire" (Kramsch, 2009), and "consumption" (Kubota, 2011). The article claims that these concepts concentrate on "the affective and emotional rather than the cognitive aspect of motivation" and contribute to the study of foreign/second language learning in "informal contexts" rather than "formal educational settings" (p. 130). In order to explore more deeply the issue of foreign/second language learning in formal contexts, the article suggests a rethinking of English

learning “motivation” and proposes a new concept of interest development. Afterwards, the article reviews several definitions of “interest”, both well-defined and ill-defined, in previous studies.

The data Tin employed were elicited via “self-report”. That is, respondents were asked to recount their past experiences of English learning. This method includes two types: using or without using the term “interest”—the former is employed in Tin’s study. The study totally selected 11 participants for analysis from a larger group of 57 of the TESOL program from Singapore, Thailand and New Zealand. Each participant was interviewed individually to tell stories about their past experiences of learning English as a foreign/second language. A key finding emerged from the study: relatively different situational features trigger the interest in foreign/second language learning in early childhood, teenage years and adulthood. In early childhood, the affective or emotional factors such as “liking, enjoyment, fun, success and the support of significant others” (p. 135) trigger interest in English learning; in teenage years, “the usefulness of knowing English itself and the pursuit of their emerging interests through English in other topics such as sports, movies, music” (p. 138) trigger interest; in adulthood, “unpleasant surprises with negative affect are reported” (p. 141) as the triggering factors as well. In what follows, I discuss the strengths and weaknesses of the paper.

2. Strengths

In my opinion, the first strength of Tin’s paper is the notion of “cognitive interest” proposed and emphasized in this study in comparison with “affective interest”. The latter refers to the widely mentioned concept of “interest” in previous studies (see Crookes & Schmidt, 1991; Dörnyei, 1994), which is affected by some elements of emotion, like/dislike and enjoyment. The former proposes that interest derives from the cognitive importance/usefulness of foreign/second language learning to the learner. The LR of this article also points out the disadvantage of the concept of “affective interest” as being powerless or unable to promote the development of language skills and knowledge and being limited when employed in formal educational contexts.

The second strength is the phase-based approach Tin adopted when examining the situational features which trigger interest in English learning. In her finding, Tin classified the relevant situational features into three categories in relation to three learning phases: early childhood, teenaged years and adulthood. She then illustrated and compared three types of situational features in accordance with these three periods in English learning. It is important for an interest researcher to study interest triggering factors according to different life periods as general learning features may vary along with the development of learners’ cognitive ability. Interest triggering factors may not be fully figured out if they are studied in a mixture of learning phases.

The third strength of Tin’s study follows from the second strength and this lies in the distinct situational features which trigger the English learning interest in adulthood as “unpleasant surprises with negative affect are reported” “as interest triggering factors” “in adulthood” (p. 140). This type of interest

triggering factors does not function in early childhood of English learning, as the study concludes that English learning interest in early childhood is often triggered by some affective or emotional elements rather than cognitive ones. While the affective or emotional factors are warmly noted in previous studies, the cognitive factors are especially proposed and emphasized in this study.

A final strength of the study is what the author has emphasized as “personal significance” compared with “general significance”. Personal significance refers to the personal triggering factors such as personal usefulness or the achievement of a set target, while general significance refers to a general assumption that English is important. Different from general significance which has much to do with motivational variables, personal significance is considered to be critical in the triggering of interest for learning English, especially in adulthood, in this study. It is important that interest triggering factors are studied from both variable personal perspectives and general perceptive angles.

3. Weaknesses

An easily observed weakness of this study is Tin’s failure to mention the early development of “motivation” research in her LR. There are chiefly three generations of researchers who have conducted studies on motivation. This study only takes the latest generation into consideration such as Dörnyei and Csizér (2006), without mentioning the works of the two earlier generations; for example, Gardner (1985) and Ryan and Deci (2000) whose works respectively represent the first two generations.

The second weakness stems from the “self-report” method Tin employed. As the author herself recognizes and explains, drawing on the view expressed by Kubota (2011), although “self-report” is a “common instrument used in interest research” (p. 132), it cannot avoid a problem of being too subjective as “language data or accounts people give of their experience in interviews, however, are not mirrored images of the actual lived experience” (p. 133). If the main method employed in a study is not objective, as Tin admits, the findings adduced from the study may be contestable and not very reliable. This is because such findings are likely to be based on the researcher’s own (or other people’s) preconceived knowledge, ideas and thoughts rather than on actual empirical evidence.

The third problem of Tin’s paper relates to the sampled data. Here, there are three issues worth mentioning. The first is that the study only selects participants for “self-report” interviews from TESOL—that is, “Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Language”. The point to be made is that TESOL students are a group of English learners who may be already interested in learning English or whose learning of English is likely to be relatively more successful if compared with English learners of non-English related fields. Besides, it is possible that there are a number of students of non-English related fields whose English are excellent or even outstanding as well. Therefore, the case studies of participants within a single discipline are not necessarily representative and applicable for learners of non-English related disciplines, in general. Consequently, the common features of English learners

across various disciplines cannot be generalized using a distinct group of TESOL students with presumably better achievements in learning English. The second issue with the sampled data is the small number of 11 participants selected for the “self-report” interviews, a situation which makes the study’s generalizability a practical impossibility. Third, Tin does not clearly spell out how the 11 students were selected for the study, making it difficult for anyone who might want to replicate the study.

The final weakness of the study is the author’s inadequate response to the gap she identified in the literature. In the LR, Tin indicated that the previous studies of motivational variables are limited in their application to formal educational contexts and in the development of language skills and knowledge. So, in her study, she set out to propose a new concept of interest development. However, in the discussion of her results/findings and in her conclusion sections, she did not highlight how her new concept of interest development and situational features are applicable to formal educational contexts as well as how they help better trigger interest and promote the learning of a foreign/second language.

4. Conclusion

Considering the strengths and weaknesses of Tin (2013)’s paper, it can be said that overall, this “interest development” is not highly insightful and it lacks depth. It tried to find a gap in motivation research by arguing that the previously identified motivational variables cannot effectively deepen the learning of English as a foreign/second language, particularly when employed in formal educational settings. The study, therefore, attempted to fill the gap with a new concept of interest development proposed in the study together with the exploration of interest triggering factors with relation to three different life phases in English learning. However, the study does not seem to have effectively filled the void in the literature it set out to fill as it did not explain in details how the new concept of interest development as well as the situational features which trigger interest help better develop rather than maintain language skills and knowledge.

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