Enhancing English Learning Motivation in Private Universities in the Context of Globalization: Rethinking Teaching Approaches

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Abstract : In the context of globalization, English proficiency has become an essential skill for university students, particularly in private institutions where learners often exhibit diverse educational backgrounds and varying levels of motivation. This paper explores how English teachers in private universities can effectively stimulate students' interest in English learning by adapting their teaching methods to better meet the needs of their learners. Drawing on current theories of second language acquisition and motivational psychology, the study highlights the challenges faced by teachers in private colleges and proposes innovative, student-centered strategies to enhance classroom engagement. The paper argues that by rethinking pedagogical practices—such as incorporating real-world content, fostering communicative competence, and embracing technology—teachers can not only improve learning outcomes but also better prepare students for global communication. This theoretical study aims to offer practical implications for English educators seeking to motivate learners in an increasingly interconnected world.

Keywords: English learning motivation; Private universities; Globalization; Pedagogical innovation

1. Introduction

With the development of globalization, English is more widely used than ever before. Users from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds would use English as a tool for intercultural communication, such as, negotiation or problem-solving [1]. Hence, English has firmly established itself as the global lingua franca, shaping educational priorities and strategies worldwide. However, this hotly discussed topic in academia has not had influence on practice, as Walker mentioned that the practical implementation of new theories always lags behind [2]. In other words, the actions taken in English language teaching to conform to the trend of English as a lingua franca (ELF) are not enough. As English is increasingly viewed as a key competence in the international job market, this development places growing demands on universities to equip students with not only linguistic skills but also intercultural communication abilities. However, in many private universities in China, students often lack strong motivation to learn English, which poses significant challenges for educators.

Compared to their counterparts in public institutions, students in private universities typically come from more varied academic and socioeconomic backgrounds. This diversity, while enriching, often results in a wide gap in language

proficiency and classroom engagement[3]. Teachers must therefore go beyond traditional, exam-oriented teaching methods and find new ways to ignite students' interest in learning English. Understanding what motivates these learners—and how to sustain that motivation in a classroom setting—has become a central concern for educators in private higher education[4]. This paper argues that in order to foster stronger English learning motivation among students in private universities, teachers must strategically adjust their teaching methods in response to both the global context and the specific needs of their learners.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Global English and Its Impact

The phenomenon of English becoming a global language has been extensively studied and documented. Because of the military action and the formation of empires, English was spread around the world, hence, as the language is widely used, it becomes a useful intermediate of communication [5]. Scholars defined this trend of global Englishes "as an inclusive paradigm looking at the linguistic, sociolinguistic and sociocultural diversity and fluidity of English use and English users in a globalized world" [6]. As a result, today, different varieties of English can be found around the world, such as Indian English, English in Canada, English in Australia, Sri Lankan English, English in Singapore, Slavic English and so on. Globalization has transformed English into a global lingua franca, making its acquisition essential for students aiming to participate in international communication, global job markets, and academic mobility. This shift places additional demands on English education, particularly in higher education institutions, where preparing students for a globalized world is an essential objective [7,8].

In the context of China, the significance of English cannot be overstated. English proficiency is regarded as an essential skill for economic advancement, higher education, and international competitiveness. The need for English language proficiency has increased due to China's rapid economic growth and growing involvement in global markets. Therefore, great importance has been attached to studying English, as it can often be essential for people who plan to pursue further education and seek a better career [9]. Accordingly, the Chinese government's policies make English a mandatory subject in schools and a significant part of entrance exams for higher education.

2.2. Characteristics of English Learning Motivation in Private University Students

English learning motivation in private university students in China is often characterized by low intrinsic interest, exam-oriented goals, and external pressure. Compared to their peers in public universities, students in private institutions typically come from more diverse academic and socioeconomic backgrounds and often have lower initial English proficiency. Many of these students view English as a compulsory subject rather than a meaningful skill for personal or professional development. As a result, their motivation tends to be instrumental and externally regulated rather than integrative or intrinsically driven.

Dörnyei's L2 Motivational Self System offers a valuable framework for understanding these learners' motivation [10]. Many private university students possess a limited or unclear Ideal L2 Self, which weakens their long-term engagement with the language. Instead, their learning is often driven by the Ought-to L2 Self, shaped by parental expectations or institutional requirements. When the L2 Learning Experience—which includes classroom tasks, teacher feedback, and peer interaction—is monotonous or exam-focused, students may lose interest or disengage altogether. Thus, any effort to improve English teaching in private universities must begin with a deeper understanding of students' motivational profiles and the contextual factors that influence them.

2.3. Theories of Motivating Language Learners

Motivation theories provide powerful insights into how English learning can be supported and sustained, especially in less privileged educational contexts. In addition to Dörnyei's L2 Motivational Self System, two other influential frameworks

are Self-Determination Theory (SDT) [11] and Expectancy-Value Theory (EVT) [12].

According to SDT, learners are more motivated when their psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness are met. In English classrooms, this implies that students should have a degree of choice in tasks, feel capable of succeeding, and experience a supportive learning environment. These conditions are often absent in rigid, top-down teaching models, that may still prevalent in private universities. Similarly, EVT suggests that students' motivation depends on their expectations for success and the value they attach to the task. If learners perceive English learning as irrelevant or unachievable, their engagement declines. Therefore, teachers must design tasks that are both accessible and meaningful—balancing challenge with attainability, and connecting learning to students' lives, goals, and aspirations.

Integrating these theories into classroom practice allows for a more nuanced understanding of how to motivate learners beyond punishment and reward, fostering deeper engagement that aligns with personal growth and global relevance.

2.4. Trends in Pedagogical Reform

In response to both motivational research and global shifts in educational philosophy, there has been a growing trend toward learner-centered pedagogical models. These models emphasize student agency, collaborative learning, and real-world application. Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) and Project-Based Learning (PBL) are two prominent approaches that reflect this shift.

TBLT focuses on the use of authentic, communicative tasks that mirror real-life language use, thereby enhancing relevance and learner engagement. Research has shown that task-based approaches promote deeper cognitive involvement and better retention, particularly when tasks are personally meaningful [13]. Similarly, PBL encourages students to explore complex, open-ended questions through extended projects, often culminating in presentations or written reports. This approach fosters not only language development but also skills such as collaboration, critical thinking, and problem-solving. For private university students—many of whom may have not previously experienced such pedagogical models—these approaches can be refreshing and highly motivating, especially when supported by scaffolding and clear assessment criteria.

Moreover, the integration of educational technology (e.g., digital storytelling, online discussion platforms, language learning apps) further enhances student-centered instruction by allowing for personalized, flexible, and interactive learning experiences.

3. Challenges in English Teaching in Private Universities

Private universities in China have played a crucial role in expanding access to higher education, especially for students who may not meet the academic requirements of public institutions. However, these institutions often face specific and persistent challenges in English language education. These challenges are not only pedagogical but also structural, stemming from differences in student backgrounds, teacher preparation, institutional priorities, and curriculum development. Addressing these challenges is essential to improve students' English proficiency and prepare them for the demands of a globalized world.

3.1. Wide Variation in Student Proficiency and Weak Learning Motivation

One of the most prominent challenges is the heterogeneity of students' English proficiency levels. Private universities typically enroll students from diverse academic backgrounds, including those with lower scores on entrance examinations and limited exposure to quality English instruction in secondary school. This results in classrooms where students' language abilities vary dramatically, making it difficult for teachers to deliver content that meets everyone's needs.

Additionally, many students lack strong internal motivation for learning English. As discussed in the literature review, their motivation is often driven by short-term, extrinsic goals—such as passing exams or meeting graduation

requirements—rather than genuine interest or long-term aspirations[10]. This weakens their engagement and reduces the likelihood of sustained language development. Without effective strategies to foster an Ideal L2 Self or to make the learning experience personally meaningful, teachers struggle to maintain students' attention and participation.

3.2. Examination-Oriented Teaching Methods

Another challenge lies in the overreliance on exam-oriented teaching practices, a legacy of China's long-standing emphasis on standardized testing. In many private universities, English instruction is still dominated by grammar-translation methods, repetitive drills, and rote memorization aimed primarily at preparing students for CET-4 or CET-6 (College English Tests). While such methods may yield short-term gains in test performance, they fail to equip students with communicative competence or real-world language skills .

This approach also limits students' exposure to authentic language use and suppresses creativity and critical thinking. It often results in passive classroom dynamics, where students become dependent on teachers and disengage from the learning process. Teachers, facing pressure to improve exam pass rates, may find it difficult to prioritize more student-centered, interactive methods, even when they are pedagogically sound.

3.3. Lack of Globalized, Communicative Content

A third challenge is the insufficient integration of global and intercultural content in English courses. In the context of globalization, English is more than an academic subject—it is a tool for cross-cultural communication, international collaboration, and global citizenship. However, the curricula in many private universities fail to reflect this reality. Textbooks and classroom materials are often outdated, overly simplified, or culturally homogeneous, offering few opportunities for students to engage with diverse perspectives or global issues [8]. This disconnect weakens the relevance of English learning for students and limits their ability to envision real-world applications of their language skills. Without exposure to global Englishes or authentic communicative contexts, students struggle to build an Ideal L2 Self that aligns with global participation [14]. Consequently, both motivation and learning outcomes suffer.

3.4. Misalignment Between Resources, Curriculum, and Student Interests

Finally, there is a mismatch between available teaching resources, curriculum design, and students' actual learning needs and interests. In many private institutions, English courses are standardized and rigid, leaving little room for personalization or adaptation. Assessments emphasize accuracy and form over fluency and meaning, and instructional materials are rarely chosen based on student feedback or engagement levels.

Moreover, many English teachers in private universities are underpaid and overworked, which affects their ability to innovate or pursue professional development. Limited access to up-to-date resources—such as interactive technology, diverse media, or authentic texts—further constrains teaching effectiveness. These systemic limitations make it difficult to foster learner autonomy, personalize instruction, or develop curricula that resonate with students' lives, values, and aspirations.

4. Strategies for Enhancing Motivation through Teaching Adjustments

Given the motivational and structural challenges outlined in the previous chapter, it is essential for English teachers in private universities to rethink their pedagogical approaches. Effective motivation is not achieved through rigid instruction or test preparation alone, but through meaningful, engaging, and personalized experiences that connect learners with real-world communication. The following strategies are informed by motivational theories such as the L2 Motivational Self System [10], Self-Determination Theory [11], and Expectancy-Value Theory [12], and they offer practical paths to fostering greater interest and engagement in English learning.

4.1. Using Authentic Materials

Authentic materials—such as news articles, videos, social media content, podcasts, and interviews—expose students to

real language in real contexts. These resources offer students a window into how English is used globally, enhancing both their linguistic competence and their cultural awareness. Research has shown that authentic materials can significantly improve learners' motivation by making content more relevant and engaging [15].

In the private university context, using authentic texts can help students better connect English learning with their everyday lives, future professions, and global issues. For example, business majors can analyze case studies from international companies, while art students can explore English-language reviews of exhibitions or films. This approach not only meets students where they are but also strengthens their Ideal L2 Self by providing a vision of using English meaningfully in the future.

4.2. Implementing Project- and Task-Based Learning

Project-Based Learning (PBL) and Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) shift the focus from passive knowledge absorption to active use of language in meaningful tasks. These student-centered approaches encourage learners to solve problems, conduct research, and produce tangible outcomes—often collaboratively. In PBL, students might complete some real-life tasks, such as, creating a bilingual campus guide, planning a cultural event, or producing a podcast on a global issue. In TBLT, students could participate in simulated job interviews, design travel itineraries, or role-play customer service scenarios. Such tasks align with both SDT and EVT principles by offering autonomy, challenge, and real-world relevance, thereby increasing intrinsic motivation and fostering deeper engagement [13,16].

4.3. Integrating Intercultural Topics

Incorporating intercultural themes into English courses helps students view language learning not just as a linguistic activity, but as a way of understanding other cultures and reflecting on their own. Topics such as cross-cultural communication styles, global holidays, or international youth culture can make lessons more dynamic and globally oriented. This approach is especially effective in building an Ideal L2 Self that aligns with students' future aspirations in an interconnected world [14]. Additionally, intercultural content naturally lends itself to critical thinking, discussion, and reflective writing—skills that are transferable across disciplines and professions. Intercultural competence is increasingly considered a key component of 21st-century education, and English classrooms in private universities are an ideal place to cultivate it.

4.4. Using Educational Technology: Blended and Hybrid Models

Educational technology, when used strategically, can create personalized, flexible, and interactive learning environments that support motivation. In particular, blended learning—which combines online and face-to-face instruction—offers the benefits of both digital autonomy and classroom community [17].

In private universities, where class sizes may be large and learner needs vary, online components (e.g., vocabulary platforms, speaking apps, or discussion forums) can supplement in-class learning, allowing students to practice at their own pace. Tools like Padlet, Kahoot, or Edmodo can increase interactivity and immediate feedback. Moreover, technology supports multimodal instruction, which is particularly beneficial for learners with different styles and proficiencies.

By integrating both synchronous and asynchronous tools, teachers can help learners to foster a more self-determined learning environment, thus improving their motivation through greater autonomy and competence.

4.5. Differentiated Instruction: ESP and Interest-Based Curricula

Lastly, differentiated instruction is key to addressing the diverse needs of students in private universities. One effective approach is to offer English for Specific Purposes (ESP) courses tailored to students' majors—such as English for Business, Design, Automobile, or Artificial Intelligence. When learners see a direct link between English and their future careers, they are more likely to value the subject and invest in learning.

In addition, interest-based elective courses—such as "English Through Movies," "Global News Reading," or "Cross-

cultural Communication Skills"—can be offered to provide variety and enhance motivation. These options not only address differing proficiency levels but also help students build personal relevance into their learning journeys, consistent with the value component of Expectancy-Value Theory [12].

5. Conclusion

This study has explored the challenges and strategies for enhancing English learning motivation in private universities in China. As discussed, these institutions face several challenges, including significant variation in student proficiency, the persistence of examination-oriented teaching, limited integration of global and intercultural content, and a mismatch between curriculum design and students' interests.

However, fostering English language learning motivation in private universities requires a shift towards more engaging, contextually relevant, and student-centered teaching methods. By embracing strategies such as authentic materials, project- and task-based learning, intercultural content, educational technology, and differentiated instruction, educators can create a more motivating and effective learning environment. This shift not only addresses the current challenges faced by private universities but also prepares students for the demands of a globalized world, equipping them with the language skills and cultural competence necessary for success in both their academic and professional lives.

Disclosure statement

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