

Understanding EFL students' motivation for participating in extracurricular contests: Insights from China

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Abstract

This study aims to provide an understanding of English as foreign language (EFL) university students' perception and experience of participating in extracurricular English contests in China. In this study, the extrinsic factors and intrinsic beliefs that contribute to university students' motivation to participate in extracurricular English contests during their study at university were examined. Forty-nine students who have participated in extracurricular English contests were investigated in questionnaire, eight of whom were invited for in-depth semi-structured interviews. Research findings show that instructors' support is the highest external factor that motivated students to participate in extracurricular English contests. On the other hand, rewards (monetary or honorary) constituted a very important factor, and school's support and parent's/friends' encouragement are other important factors that contribute to their willingness to participate. Additionally, the research also revealed the crucial importance of their strong intrinsic beliefs.

Keywords: student motivation, EFL students, extracurricular contest

1. Introduction

With the deepening of higher education reform, colleges and universities in China pay more and more attention to the development of students' core literacy. It is increasingly recognized that colleges and universities represent a viable venue in which to teach competencies and inherently have mandates aimed at promoting students' holistic development and all-round success (Kinzie & Kuh, 2017) rather than solely emphasizing success on standardized tests (Scales et al., 2006). Therefore, to comprehensively facilitate university students' positive development, extracurricular activities, which are defined as developmental activities performed by students that fall outside of the normal school curriculum and are practiced outside of regular class hours (Foneris, Camiré & Williamson, 2015), are widely utilized. As Feldman and Matjasko (2005) state "extracurricular activities offer a means to express and explore one's identity, generate social and human capital, and offer a challenging setting outside of academics" (161). Relevant research evidence (eg. Chan, 2016; Han and Kwon, 2018) revealed that extracurricular activities may enhance students' academic outcomes, academic confidence, and their sense of self-efficacy at schools, cultivate students' problem-solving, analytical and critical skills, and foster students' positive psychological characters and interpersonal competence. However, these studies that focused on identifying the effect of extracurricular activities on students' academic outcomes and behavioral or psycho-

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logical changes could only provide a partial and crude account of the nature of students' participation in such activities. What matters more are students' perception, understanding and beliefs of extracurricular activities for their overall development, namely, their lived experience with extracurricular activities. Thus, to gain an in-depth understanding of extracurricular activities, it is important to take a students' perspective and survey the terrain of extracurricular activities with regard to the nature of their participation experience. And quite apart from that, there exists a paucity of research on the understanding of university students' participation in extracurricular contests.

The current study examined the motivating factors which promoted EFL university students to participate in extracurricular contests and the participants' perception and experience of participating in extracurricular English contests, attempting to further probe into the extrinsic factors and intrinsic beliefs that contribute to their motivation to participate. It is hoped that findings from this study can provide some contextual foreground for the future longitudinal studies and bring implications for the construction of more effective extracurricular activities in the future.

2. Literature review

Achievement motivation theorists attempt to explain the reason why people choose tasks, persist on those tasks, and vigorously conduct them (Pintrich & Schunk, 1996). People's definite behaviors can be attributed to motivation. Motivation refers to the desire to achieve a goal or a certain performance level, leading to goal-directed behavior (Franken, 1994). Many researchers have conducted related study on the relationship between motivation and certain behaviors. Georgiou & Kyza (2018) investigated whether students' immersion on learning in Augmented Reality settings was influenced by their motivation, finding that immersion was positively predicted by specific motivation and in turn, learning outcomes were positively associated with the level of immersion that students achieved. Zainuddin (2018) examined students' learning performance and perceived motivation in a gamified flipped classroom, identifying that students motivated to compete and beat other students during the gamification activities and their motivation to compete also promoted their learning performances. Within the context of Rogers theory of perceived attributes, Raman, Vachharajani & Achuthan (2018) investigated students' motivation to adopt programming contests, revealing that student motivations were strongly related to attributes like relative advantage, peer influence, perceived enjoyment and perceived usefulness, and that students generally expressed positive attitude towards participating in programming contests as it helped strengthen their problem solving and programming skills. When we refer to college students as being motivated, we mean that they are making efforts to attempt to accomplish certain tasks. The present study investigated college students' engagement in extracurricular English contest activities, namely, effort and persistence. Understanding students' participation in those activities is imperative, for the evidence from motivation theory suggested that the level of students' participation is significantly related to their expectancy on outcomes and various achievements and performance (Furrer & Skinner, 2003). The expectancy-value theory explained how motivation influences people's choice, persistence, and performance. When participating in extracurricular English contest activities, they expected to obtain good performances and thus could benefit from those activities. In this study, we adopted the expectancy-value theory of motivation (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002; Pintrich, 1989; Wigfield & Eccles, 2000) as a framework to conceptualize college students' motivation. The expectancy factors (such as language skills improved; social experience

obtained; other forms of self-efficacy) have been described as college students' intrinsic motivation to perform English contest tasks and meanwhile the extrinsic component (such as school's support; teacher's instruction; etc.) constituted important influential factors (Pintrich & de Groot, 1990). Ryan, Rigby & Przybylski (2006) pointed out that the events and conditions that promote a person's sense of competence and autonomy enhance their intrinsic motivation, which in turn, can produce feelings of enjoyment and interest (Deci & Ryan, 1985). In his discussion about motivation, Bandura (1997) included the perspective of expectancies by distinguishing between efficacy expectations and outcome expectancies. He contended that expectancy-value theorists tended to focus on outcome expectations in their research models while easily neglected that efficacy expectations are more predictive of performance than are outcome expectations. Many researches have demonstrated that self-efficacy contributed to students' personal effort and persistence (Cox & Whaley, 2004; Fan, 2011) and showed a positive relationship between students' self-efficacy and academic engagement (e.g. Zeldin, Britner & Pajares, 2008; Restubog, Florentino & Garcia, 2010). That is, students with high self-efficacy are more likely to actively take part in diverse academic tasks and make greater effort to accomplish them, and consequently these behaviors enhance academic outcomes. According to Rodgers et al (2014), self-efficacy triggered students' goal pursuit, behavioral engagement, and persistent efforts. Based on the expectancy-value theory, Wu & Fan (2017) investigated the relationship between college students' achievement motivation and achievement-related behaviors, showing that students' academic self-efficacy and subjective task value constituted two important components. Thus, current literature has yielded some insights into the relationship between motivation and behaviors. However, there are a few explorations about students' motivation to participate in extracurricular English contests, especially under China's cultural contexts. This study aimed at enriching our understanding of this issue by examining the nature of China's EFL university students' extracurricular activities.

3. Research design

3.1 Participants

The study was conducted at a teacher-education oriented university in eastern China. This university whose primary goal is to cultivate future teachers highlights the characteristics of Teacher Education, thus attaching great importance to the development its students' professional skills as a teacher. As a part of extracurricular extensive learning activities, this university actively organizes and encourages students to participate in extracurricular English contests so as to improve their language proficiency and professional skills. During the three years from 2015 to 2018, more than 50 English as foreign language (EFL) students from this university had won the third prize and above in a variety of English contests at the provincial level and above, five of whom had won the first prize in the national English competition. Certainly, only forty-nine students agreed to be invited to participate in this study, and only eight of the 49 students were willingly and voluntarily participated in the follow-up interviews.

3.2 Data collection and analysis

In this study, a blend of quantitative and qualitative method of data collection was adopted. Firstly, a questionnaire was conducted to survey the motivating factors of students' participation in extracurricular English contests, and statistical SPSS was utilized to analyze collected questionnaire data. The questionnaire surveyed the factors that the interview participants reported having influenced their engagement in extracurricular English contests and that the existing literature

concerning intrinsic and extrinsic motivation has identified as major factors that influence students' behaviors, including instructor support, school support, parents/ friends/ peers support, and performance expectancy (i.e. perceived useful of the behavior for personal development) (Dörnyei, 2001; Pintrich, 2004). All the items were measured using a 6-point Likert scale, with 1 being strongly disagree and 6 being strongly agree. The instrument was pilot tested ($\alpha=0.91$) on 20 foreign language learners at this university for their understanding of each item in the survey, showing a good variability. Qualitative data pertinent to students' perception and experience of participating in extracurricular English contests come from in-depth semi-structured interviews with the eight participants. The interview on each participant lasted for about 1 hour with questions focusing on students' motivation and suggestions on participating in English contests, including such questions as "what's your purpose of participating in English contests?", "what instructors and your school did to help you?", "what's your suggestions on English contests?", etc. The aim of the interviews and its procedure were clearly explained to all participants. The semi-structured interviews were verbatim transcribed and analyzed through a hybrid approach of inductive and deductive thematic analysis (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). Transcripts were sent back to the respondents for validating before used for analysis.

4. Findings

4.1 Motivating factors of students' participation in extracurricular English contests

The questionnaire consists of both extrinsic and intrinsic motivation factors (See Table 1). Extrinsic motivation factors are from instructors, school, and parents/friends/peers/, while intrinsic motivation factors are about students' considerations for personal development. From the investigation result, it can be found that both extrinsic and intrinsic motivation factors significantly promoted students' participating in English contests. Among extrinsic motivation factors, the motivation factors from instructors are more prominent, especially instructor's tutoring attitude ($M=5.1633$) and instructor's tutoring remarks ($M=5.1633$). In terms of the motivation factors from school, compared with other 5 factors, monetary or honorary obtained from participating in English Contest comparatively highly promoted students ($M=5.0816$). As for the motivating factors from parents/friends/peers, it can be found that parents' and friends' encouragement is more significant (respectively $M=4.8163$ and $M=4.8367$). Additionally, the result demonstrated that intrinsic motivation highly promoted students' participation in English contests, especially they believed that participation in English contests can enrich their insights ($M=5.0816$) and enrich their experiences ($M=5.1224$).

In the questionnaire, students' suggestions on extracurricular English contests were also covered (See Table 2). The investigation result indicated that students hoped that English contest can be related to their learning ($M=5.1429$) and future career ($M=5.2653$), demonstrating students' essential motivation in participating in English contests.

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Table 1 Motivating factors of students' participation in extracurricular English contests (N=49)

Motivating factors	Mean	Std. Deviation
Motivation factors from Instructors		
Instructor's encouraging words motivated me	5.0612	1.12561
Instructor's professional knowledge promoted me	5.1224	.99232
Instructor's tutoring strategies promoted me	5.1020	1.08484
Instructor's tutoring experiences promoted me	5.1020	.96274
Instructor's tutoring attitude promoted me	5.1633	.92075
Instructor's tutoring remarks promoted me	5.1633	.92075
Motivation factors from School		
School's support on English Contest promoted me	4.8776	.92720
School's environment and atmosphere of English Contest promoted me	4.8980	.79700
School's prize mechanism of English Contest motivated me	4.9592	.84061
School's issuing information on English Contest promoted me	4.4490	.98025
School's propaganda of students' obtaining prizes promoted me	4.3673	1.01435
Money or honor obtained from participating in English Contest promoted me	5.0816	.83757
Motivation factors from Parents/ Friends/Peers/		
Parents' encouragement motivated me	4.8163	1.01393
Friends' encouragement motivated me	4.8367	.98630
Peers'/ classmates' encouragement motivated me	4.7959	.99957
Peers'/Classmates' model motivated me	4.6122	1.09576
Motivation factors from the considerations for personal development		
Participating in English Contest can help utilize my professional knowledge	5.0204	.87773
Participating in English Contest can help enlarge my insights	5.0816	.86209
Participating in English Contest can help enrich my experiences	5.1224	.94940
Participating in English Contest can help enrich my interpersonal interactivity	4.8367	1.06745
Participating in English Contest can help cultivate my psychological quality	5.0612	.96627

Table 2. Participants' suggestions on extracurricular English contests (N=49)

	Mean	Std. Deviation
I hope English Contest can be related to my current major learning	5.1429	.93541
I hope English Contest can contribute to my future career	5.2653	.88448
I hope my school will create more opportunities of English Contests	5.0408	.99915
I hope my school will make English Contests diverse	5.1224	.94940

4.2 Participants' perceptions of participation in extracurricular English contests

Understanding how students perceive of their participation in English contests enables us to gain a more comprehensive view of their motivation and to support their professional learning. In this study, the semi-structured interview was conducted, and findings are discussed as follows.

Instructor's help. Every respondent seems to agree that instructor's help plays an important role in their participation motivation, leading them to be active and success in English contests. All of them believed that instructors have rich professional knowledge, tutoring experiences and tutoring strategies, which helps them very much during training and preparation for contests. Instructor's attitude and remarks have a high impact on them. When asked about instructor's help, some respondents stated:

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“With her rich tutoring experience, the instructor guided me to collect related language materials, helped me to modify my intonation and accent, and more importantly taught me how to answer questions.” (Respondent 1)

“My instructor asked me to watch videos of other students who have won prizes of high levels, and taught me how to imitate their gestures, oral expressions, and speaking speed.” (Respondent 2)

As a tutor, the instructor is very influential and helpful. Students will abide by instruction and guidance of the instructor, as one respondent said:

“The instructor is the motivator and guidance for us. Besides, the instructor could help in enhancing student performance by encouraging them to be more confident. Therefore training, guiding, motivating and helping are the duty of the instructor. On his guidance, attitude and personality, the instructor should be the role model. Therefore the instructor can steer students into achieving their greatest potential.” (Respondent 3)

Based on the respondents' point of views, the instructor is a tutor and motivator for students to be more motivated and successful in English contests. The findings revealed the significant role that instructors can play to motivate students' participating in contest.

School's support. Respondents stated that school's support is mainly embodied in the organization of English contests, the construction of atmosphere, the information issuing, and the prize mechanisms of English contests.

“Our school helps to issue the notice about the contest information and organizes teachers to instruct us. In a good atmosphere where many students participate in English contest, we will be more motivated to participate.” (Respondent 4)

As far as monetary reward or honor is concerned, respondents highlighted its importance by stating that

“It is a great pleasure to win a bonus or a certificate of honor in an English contest. It is not only a reward for my efforts, but also a material or spiritual encouragement.” (Respondent 5)

“Winning a prize or an honorary certificate is an affirmation of my professional ability. They are the fruits of my growth. Especially the honorary certificates can enhance my self-confidence.” (Respondent 6)

Parents'/friends'/peers' encouragement. Respondents perceived that the encouragement from parents, friends or peers did have impact on their motivation to participate in English contests. Perhaps parent are the closest person to these participants and they are still dependent of their parent as they are still studying at school. Their parents encouraged them to be more active at school and improve their professional potential by participating more extracurricular activities. This can be seen when one respondent said:

“My parents have contributed a lot of energy and support for my success in extracurricular activities. For Example, they asked me about my preparation for the competition, and backed me up. This encouraged me to make more efforts.” (Respondent 7)

Not only spiritual encouragement from parents will lead those participants to be involved in English contests, the encouragement from friends, peers or classmates is also an important factor for them to be self-motivated.

“My friends and peers gave me help when I was preparing the competition. They even helped me look for related materials for the competition.” (Respondent 8)

“My peers acted as judges, and they would help correct some problems in my English speech, such as intonation, gesture and facial expression.” (Respondent 9)

Intrinsic motivation: considerations for personal development. Accounts from the participants revealed that their intrinsic motivation constituted a decisive factor for their participation in extracurricular English contests. Almost without exception, they participated in contests for personal development, either for professional study or future career development, which can be seen from two representative respondents' reports.

“As English majors, we can put the professional knowledge we have learned into practice by taking part in extracurricular English contests. The practice of classroom knowledge needs a platform, and English contest is a good platform to show and exercise myself.” (Respondent 10)

“My dream job is to be an English teacher. Now I need to improve my skills, especially my spoken English, so taking part in the English speech contest can not only help me improve my spoken English, but also improve other related skills as a normal university student.” (Respondent 11)

Almost all the respondents agreed that the purpose of their participating in English contests is to promote the practical application of knowledge, exercise language skills, and train themselves for the future career as a teacher. This could be quite understandable, for as normal university students they should equip themselves with adequate skills for their future teacher careers.

5. Discussion

This study focused on survey what motivated China's EFL university students' participation in extracurricular English contests and their perceptions and experience. The data from questionnaire demonstrated that both intrinsic and extrinsic factors motivated students' engagement. The extrinsic factors significantly derived from instructors' support and the consideration of rewards. All participants agreed that instructors play an extremely important role in steering them into active participation and success in contests. As one participant stated “the instructor's knowledge, experience, and skillful instructions help us make good preparations for contests and her attitude, and motivational words motivate us to be confident”. Additionally, they felt happy to obtain rewards either in monetary or honorary form or both by participating in extracurricular English contests activities. Certainly, the intrinsic factor, that is, students' beliefs on the usefulness of extracurricular English contests activities on their future personal development is crucial.

The analysis of the interview transcripts revealed that all eight participants rated the extracurricular English contests high. Firstly, they perceived that the extracurricular English contests provide a platform for them to improve learning and show themselves, not only stretching their English language ability, but comprehensively fostering their competence in language knowledge ap-

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plication, judgment analysis, logical speculation, on-the-spot reaction and psychological adjustment. Secondly, they stated that extracurricular English contests helped enrich their experience and make them more mature and calmer. Thirdly, they believed that they met different people during the contests, established a good interpersonal relationship, learned a lot from them, and broadened their horizons. According to the interviews from the eight participants, school's supportive atmosphere did have the very influential role in triggering students' involvement in contests, for the school provided them with myriad convenient conditions, such as arranging tutor/s, organizing training and sessions, publicizing award-winning students on college's website, etc. In fact, it is the propaganda of these award-winning students from college's website, one participant reported, that motivates her to take an active part in the contests activities by following their example. On the other hand, they assumed that parent's/friends' encouragement are other important factors that contribute to their motivation and willingness to participate.

Additionally, the analysis of interview transcripts also revealed the crucial importance of their strong intrinsic beliefs, because they felt that they did encounter some negative experience, such as much time and energy consumed in preparing for contests; physical and mental pressure; unexpected faults made in contests.

6. Conclusion and implications

The implications of this study for higher education are prominent. Given the positive feedback from the EFL university students who participated in the extracurricular English contests, this study helped to reinforce the notion that, no matter the context, higher education should create opportunities through multifaceted levels for more if not all students rather than having a limited number of extracurricular contests available. In particular, this study demonstrated that extracurricular contests could be utilized as an effective way of fostering pre-service teacher's comprehensive competence, and accelerating pre-job preparation and role-learning for the students of normal institutions. The perceptions from participants specifically highlighted the importance of tutor's instruction and their motivational words, which indicates that, to increase students' access to extracurricular contests and reduce tutors' workload, a greater number of teachers should be encouraged to be involved in instructing the activities. Furthermore, help from instructors, especially for students' psychological adjustment during contests, particularly entails. Additionally, it should be noted that although financial rewards from winning a prize may be a factor which motivates students to participate, students should be ritually reminded that utilizing contests activities to promote competence development is the top priority. Certainly, although as a preliminary research with some limitations of self-reported data and a comparatively small number of samples, this study enabled to bring some enlightenment to similar topics. It is hoped that further research will be conducted to probe into the specific mechanisms that explain the effects of and relationships between extracurricular contests and university students' academic outcomes.

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