

Motivation and Speaking Strategy Use among Chinese International Students in the UK: A Dynamic Perspective

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Abstract

This study adopts a narrative review approach to systematically explore the relevant research on the second language learning motivation and oral strategy use of Chinese students studying in the UK from a dynamic perspective. Current research indicates that second language learning motivation is not a stable individual trait but is a dynamic system that continuously evolves in the context of academic situations, social interactions, and identity construction. Additionally, oral learning strategies have shifted from formalized strategies focused on accuracy to more flexible and communicative ones. Furthermore, there is an interactional relationship between motivation and strategy use, forming a collaborative evolutionary mechanism: Motivation influences the selection and persistence of strategies, while effective strategy use, through positive feedback, reinforces learning motivation. Moreover, situational factors such as social networks, institutional environments, and cross-cultural experiences play important mediating roles in this process. This study integrates psychological, behavioral, and sociocultural perspectives to deepen the understanding of second language development in the context of studying abroad and points out that current research still lacks longitudinal tracking and the application of mixed methods, providing references for future research and teaching practice.

Keywords

L2 motivation, speaking strategies, Chinese international students, study abroad, dynamic perspective

1. Introduction

In recent years, the United Kingdom has emerged as one of the most significant destinations for international students, particularly those from China. According to the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA), Chinese students account for a substantial proportion of the international student population in UK higher education institutions. Despite achieving relatively high scores in standardized English proficiency examinations such as IELTS, many Chinese students encounter persistent challenges when engaging in authentic communicative contexts, including seminar discussions, group work, academic presentations, and informal social interactions. This phenomenon reflects a critical discrepancy between test-oriented language competence and contextualized communicative ability. Within the Chinese educational system, English learning has traditionally prioritized grammatical accuracy, vocabulary acquisition, and reading comprehension, often at the expense of oral interaction and communicative fluency [1]. Consequently, learners

entering English-medium academic environments may experience constraints in spontaneous expression, discourse management, and interactional competence. Importantly, these challenges cannot be fully explained by linguistic knowledge alone. Increasing evidence suggests that learner-internal factors, particularly motivation and learning strategies, play a decisive role in shaping second language (L2) development outcomes [2,3]. In study-abroad contexts, where learners are immersed in authentic linguistic and sociocultural environments, these factors become even more salient due to increased demands for real-time communication and cross-cultural adaptation. However, existing research has largely examined L2 motivation and speaking strategies in isolation, often adopting static rather than dynamic perspectives that fail to capture how these two constructs interact and evolve over time in study-abroad contexts [4]. This literature review aims to synthesize existing research on Chinese students' English speaking development in the UK, with a specific focus on three interrelated dimensions. First, it examines the dynamic nature of L2 learning motivation, emphasizing its temporal variability and contextual dependence. Second, it explores the use and adaptation of speaking-related learning strategies, particularly in academic and social interaction. Third, it analyzes the interaction between motivation and strategy use, highlighting their reciprocal and mutually reinforcing relationship. By integrating these perspectives, this review contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how Chinese students transition from exam-oriented learners to active participants in English-speaking environments.

2. L2 Learning Motivation in Study-Abroad Contexts

2.1 Theoretical Framework: L2 Motivational Self System

Dörnyei's L2 Motivational Self System has been widely recognized as a comprehensive framework for understanding learner motivation in second language acquisition [2]. The model consists of three key components: the Ideal L2 Self (representing one's aspirations to become a proficient L2 user), the Ought-to L2 Self (reflecting externally imposed expectations and obligations), and the L2 Learning Experience (capturing situational influences related to the immediate learning environment). Together, these dimensions aim to account for both internal and external sources of motivation. However, despite its explanatory power, the L2 Motivational Self System has been criticized for underemphasizing contextual and interactional factors in real-world communication, treating motivation largely as a static cognitive construct rather than a dynamic, socially situated process [4]. This limitation suggests that a purely tripartite framework is insufficient for capturing how motivation fluctuates in response to ongoing communicative experiences—a gap that calls for more process-oriented and context-sensitive examination in the following sections.

2.2 Dynamic Changes in Motivation

Building on the critique that static models overlook temporal variability, a central innovation in recent L2 research is the conceptualization of motivation as a dynamic and evolving process. Rather than viewing motivation as a stable trait, scholars increasingly emphasize its responsiveness to contextual influences. In the Chinese educational context, for instance, learners typically exhibit a strong Ought-to L2 Self, driven by examination requirements, parental expectations, and societal pressures [5]. While such externally regulated motivation can lead to high levels of effort, it often lacks sustainability in communicative contexts where immediate language use is required. In contrast, study-abroad contexts such as those experienced by Chinese students in the UK tend to enhance the salience of the Ideal L2 Self. Geng found that exposure to authentic communicative situations encourages learners to develop clearer visions of themselves as competent English users [6]. This transformation reflects a shift from instrumental and externally driven motivation to internally regulated and identity-related motivation. However, this shift is not automatic or uniform across learners; individual differences, prior experiences, and contextual factors all influence its extent. Empirically, Yue et al. demonstrated that learners' motivation fluctuates significantly during study-abroad experiences [4]. Factors such as successful communication, social integration, and academic achievement can enhance motivation, while negative experiences, including communication breakdowns and cultural misunderstandings, may lead to temporary declines. Building on this perspective, Wu proposed a developmental model consisting of three stages: the initial stage, the adjustment stage, and the internalization stage [7]. This staged pattern is consistent with earlier qualitative findings. Li argues that Chinese students in UK higher education settings gradually move from reliance on passive coping mechanisms to more proactive communicative engagement [1]. Such changes are closely associated with increased exposure to authentic interaction and the development of self-

regulatory awareness, both of which contribute to the internalization of learning motivation. In the initial stage, learners often experience anxiety, uncertainty, and reduced willingness to communicate. This is followed by an adjustment stage, characterized by gradual adaptation and increased participation. Finally, in the internalization stage, learners develop stable and self-sustaining motivation, often associated with increased confidence and communicative competence. This dynamic perspective highlights that motivation is not merely a precursor to learning but is continuously shaped by learners' experiences. However, existing studies tend to rely on cross-sectional data, limiting their ability to capture long-term motivational trajectories. Therefore, there is a need for more longitudinal research to fully understand the evolution of motivation in study-abroad contexts.

2.3 Emotional and Identity Dimensions of Motivation

While the dynamic perspective addresses temporal variability, it does not fully account for the affective and social dimensions of motivation. Recent research has therefore expanded the scope of motivation studies by incorporating emotional and identity-related factors. Zou et al. introduced the concept of L2 pride, demonstrating that positive emotional experiences can significantly enhance learner engagement, persistence, and willingness to communicate [8]. From a sociocultural perspective, Norton emphasized that language learning is closely linked to identity construction [9]. Learners invest in language learning not only to acquire linguistic competence but also to gain access to social networks, academic opportunities, and cultural capital. For Chinese students in the UK, identity negotiation is particularly complex. They must navigate multiple roles, including being international students, non-native speakers, and emerging academic participants. These identities are often shaped by power relations, cultural expectations, and communicative experiences. However, while the integration of emotional and identity perspectives provides valuable insights, several issues remain underexplored. First, the role of emotional experiences in shaping motivation deserves further attention. While positive emotions such as confidence and pride have been widely discussed, negative emotions-including anxiety and fear of negative evaluation-may exert an equally significant influence on learners' engagement. For many Chinese students, the pressure to perform in academic settings can lead to heightened communication anxiety, which in turn reduces their willingness to participate in discussions. This suggests that motivation is not solely driven by aspirational self-images but is also constrained by affective barriers. Second, identity construction is not a linear process but involves continuous negotiation between different social roles. As Norton argues, learners' investment in language learning depends on their perceived access to symbolic and material resources [9]. In the UK context, limited interaction with native speakers or perceived exclusion from local communities may weaken learners' motivation to engage in communication. Identity, therefore, functions as a mediating mechanism linking motivation and social participation. Future research should consider how emotional and identity-related factors interact with contextual conditions to shape motivation in a more comprehensive manner.

3. English Speaking Learning Strategies

3.1 Strategy Taxonomy and Conceptual Developments

Oxford's taxonomy of language learning strategies remains one of the most influential frameworks in the field [3]. It categorizes strategies into six types: memory, cognitive, compensation, metacognitive, affective, and social strategies. In the context of speaking development, three categories are particularly relevant. Metacognitive strategies enable learners to plan, monitor, and evaluate their performance. Social strategies facilitate interaction and communication with others. Compensation strategies allow learners to overcome linguistic limitations during real-time communication. Li found that Chinese students in the UK frequently employ metacognitive strategies to manage academic demands [1]. These strategies include setting learning goals, monitoring performance, and reflecting on communication outcomes. Such practices indicate a shift toward greater learner autonomy.

3.2 Strategy Deployment in Formal and Informal Contexts

Speaking strategies are deployed differently depending on the communicative setting. This section integrates evidence from both academic (formal) and social/digital (informal) contexts to provide a holistic picture. In academic settings (e.g., seminars, presentations, critical debates), learners often face high linguistic

and cognitive demands. Wu et al. identified several strategies commonly used by Chinese students, including paraphrasing, approximation, and strategic pausing [10]. These strategies function as compensatory mechanisms, enabling learners to maintain communication despite linguistic constraints. However, excessive reliance on such strategies may also indicate limitations in linguistic competence and may hinder the development of more advanced discourse skills. In addition, learners often engage in pre-task planning, preparing vocabulary and arguments in advance. While this approach can improve accuracy and confidence, it may reduce spontaneity and limit opportunities for real-time interaction. This tendency is closely linked to prior exam-oriented training, which reinforces error avoidance and form accuracy over interactional risk-taking. As a result, learners may struggle to develop discourse-level competence, including the ability to construct arguments, respond critically, and engage in extended discussions. Moreover, the effectiveness of speaking strategies is closely related to the level of contextual support available. Classroom environments that encourage participation and provide constructive feedback are more likely to promote the use of interactive strategies. Conversely, highly competitive or evaluation-focused environments may reinforce avoidance behaviors. Li observed that some Chinese students prefer to remain silent during seminars to avoid making mistakes, which reduces their opportunities for language practice [1]. This finding suggests that strategy use is not only an individual choice but is also shaped by environmental factors. In informal contexts (e.g., social interactions, digital communication), learners have more opportunities for authentic language use but also face different challenges. Qiu et al. found that video-based communication tasks significantly enhance learner engagement compared to text-based interactions, suggesting that multimodal environments support both cognitive and emotional involvement [11]. Chinese students abroad often use online resources to practice listening and speaking skills, thereby compensating for limited face-to-face interaction opportunities. However, while digital environments offer flexibility and accessibility, they may not fully replicate the complexity of real-life communication. Therefore, their effectiveness in developing advanced speaking competence remains a subject of debate.

3.3 Strategic Competence, Individual Differences, and Cognitive Mechanisms

Strategy use is influenced by a range of individual factors, including motivation, cognitive style, and self-regulation ability. He et al. found that learners with higher levels of self-regulation tend to use a wider range of strategies and apply them more effectively [12]. Du emphasized the importance of strategic flexibility, which refers to the ability to adapt strategy use according to situational demands [13]. In study-abroad contexts, where communicative situations are diverse and unpredictable, such flexibility is essential. Beyond individual differences, a deeper understanding of strategic competence requires examining the cognitive mechanisms underlying strategy selection. The tendency of Chinese students to favor paraphrasing, strategic pausing, and pre-task planning is not arbitrary. As noted earlier, it reflects a learned preference for accuracy and error avoidance, rooted in exam-oriented educational experiences. Cognitively, these strategies reduce cognitive load during real-time production by allowing learners to monitor output more carefully and avoid high-risk expressions. However, this comes at the cost of reduced fluency and less practice in spontaneous meaning negotiation. Effective strategic competence thus involves not only knowing a repertoire of strategies but also knowing when and how to flexibly shift between accuracy-oriented and fluency-oriented approaches based on situational demands. Existing research often treats strategies as isolated variables, overlooking their interaction with motivation and contextual factors. This limitation highlights the need for more holistic, process-oriented investigations that link strategic behavior to learners' motivational profiles and identity construction.

4. Interaction Between Motivation and Strategy Use

The relationship between motivation and learning strategies is both reciprocal and dynamic. Dörnyei argued that motivation influences the selection, frequency, and persistence of strategy use, while successful strategy use reinforces motivation through positive learning experiences [2]. Wu demonstrated that learners' strategy use evolves alongside their motivational development [7]. In the early stages, learners rely on surface-level strategies such as memorization. As their motivation becomes internalized, they adopt more interactive and communicative strategies. Yue et al. identified social networks as a key mediating factor [4]. Learners who actively engage with peers and native speakers are more likely to use social strategies and maintain higher levels of motivation. This interaction can be conceptualized as a feedback loop, in which motivation drives strategy use, and effective strategy use enhances motivation. However, empirical research on this interaction

remains limited, particularly in longitudinal contexts. A deeper examination of this interaction reveals that motivation and strategy use should be conceptualized as components of a dynamic system rather than independent variables. In such a system, changes in one component inevitably influence the other over time. For instance, a learner who experiences success in using communication strategies may develop increased confidence, which strengthens their Ideal L2 Self and encourages further engagement. Conversely, repeated communication difficulties may lead to decreased motivation and reduced strategy use, creating a negative cycle. Moreover, the interaction between motivation and strategies is mediated by social and contextual factors. Yue et al. highlight the role of social networks in facilitating both motivation and language use [4]. Learners who establish meaningful relationships with peers and native speakers are more likely to engage in authentic communication and employ a wider range of strategies. This suggests that motivation and strategy use cannot be fully understood without considering the broader social environment in which learning takes place. Despite these insights, current research still lacks an integrated theoretical framework that systematically explains the co-development of motivation and strategies. Most studies examine these constructs separately, which limits our understanding of their interaction. Therefore, future research should adopt a more holistic perspective, combining psychological, behavioral, and social dimensions to better capture the complexity of second language learning in study-abroad contexts.

5. Challenges and Adaptation of Chinese Students in the UK

5.1 Educational Background and Communicative Constraints

Chinese students' prior educational experiences often emphasize accuracy over fluency, leading to limited opportunities for spontaneous communication [10]. As a result, learners may experience constraints in real-time expression. This mismatch between prior learning experiences and new academic expectations can result in reduced participation and confidence in speaking activities.

5.2 Adaptive Strategies and Intercultural Development

To address these challenges, learners adopt various adaptive strategies, which can be categorized into cognitive and sociocultural dimensions. From a cognitive perspective, Li observed that students engage in observational learning, analyzing discourse patterns of peers and lecturers to improve their own speaking performance [1]. This strategy involves consciously noticing and replicating effective expressions, turn-taking norms, and argumentation structures. Such cognitive strategies help learners build procedural knowledge and reduce anxiety by increasing predictability in communication. In contrast, from a sociocultural perspective, Qiu emphasized the role of intercultural awareness in strategy adaptation [11]. Increased understanding of British academic culture, communication styles, and social norms enables learners to participate more effectively in discussions and group work. Unlike cognitive strategies that focus on internal processing, sociocultural strategies involve active interpretation of contextual cues and adjustment of behavior according to cultural expectations. Both types of strategies are complementary: cognitive strategies provide the foundational skills for accurate production, while sociocultural strategies enhance appropriateness and social integration.

5.3 Implications and Research Gaps

The literature highlights the importance of adopting a dynamic and integrative perspective on L2 learning. Motivation and strategy use should be examined as interconnected processes that evolve over time. However, several gaps remain. There is a lack of longitudinal studies exploring the co-development of motivation and strategy use. Additionally, the role of digital learning environments requires further investigation. Future research should adopt mixed-method approaches to capture the complexity of these processes.

6. Conclusion

This review demonstrates that L2 motivation among Chinese students in the UK is not a stable trait but a dynamic construct that evolves over time in response to academic and social experiences. Concurrently, speaking strategies shift from rigid, accuracy-oriented approaches to more flexible, context-sensitive deployment. These patterns indicate that both motivation and strategic behavior are adaptive rather than fixed.

A key mechanism underlying this adaptation is the co-evolutionary relationship between motivation and strategy use. Motivation influences the selection and persistence of strategies, while successful strategy use reinforces motivation through positive feedback loops. This reciprocal dynamic suggests that learners who experience success in using communication strategies are more likely to develop a stronger Ideal L2 Self, which in turn encourages further strategic engagement. These findings carry important implications for both pedagogy and institutional support. Pedagogically, instructional interventions should integrate motivational regulation with strategy training, helping learners move from exam-oriented habits to interactive risk-taking. Institutionally, universities should provide structured opportunities for authentic communication, such as discussion-based seminars and peer mentoring programs, as well as intercultural support to facilitate identity negotiation. Future research should adopt longitudinal, mixed-method designs to capture the co-evolutionary process and examine how contextual factors mediate the motivation strategy interaction.

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The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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