

# An Analysis of English Learning Agendas. Private College Students in China as the new and more pragmatic type of English learners

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## Abstract

I focus on the differences in study purposes between the 2 groups of Chinese college students: private and public college students. I questioned 67 students from different colleges of different levels. I have worked out my own questionnaire that listed the 0 (zero) component alongside the traditional Likert scale of 45 items soliciting answers for the purposes of getting more details about issues that students disregard. I divided the questions into 7 general rubrics: exam-orientedness, personal factors, career goals, social factors, family factors, goals related to entertainment and further studies. My findings are related to students' opinions of exam-orientedness and entertainment-centered motivation. Results are: academic advancement to Master degree, PhD and family factors have little influence on motivating students to learn English. According to comparison and contrast, both private and public college students concern about exams which is an unchangeable purpose in studying English. In addition, private college students care about exams more than public college students. However, when talking about Master's degree or PhD, public college students show more enthusiasm. After compared with public college students, private college students tend to emphasize on entertainment use (such as movies, songs). My analysis can help teachers improve their teaching.

## Keywords

Motivations, methodologies, teaching methods

## Introduction

Public colleges refer to first tier and second tier colleges. Private colleges have comprised the third

tier colleges in China since 1999. (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2011). They are the new type of colleges with short history. I regard private college students as a new type of students in China, and they constitute a new mass type of English learners.

I sent questionnaires and solicited responses from Chinese students of different universities: public colleges like China University of Political Science and Law, Beijing University of Posts and Telecommunications, Sichuan International Studies University, Hainan University and up to 20 others; private colleges include Xingjian College of Guangxi University, Xiangsi Lake College of Guangxi University for Nationalities. Students specialize in different courses like English, Engineering, E-commerce etc. My study investigates students' learning purposes and their styles of learning English.

## 1. Method

### 1.1 Novelty

I describe the collective features of Chinese private college students in terms of their motivation to learn English and their learning agendas; I analyze differences between the sub-groups: private college students and public college students. Other authors before me focused on Chinese undergraduates from public colleges.

### 1.2 Questionnaires

According to Hutchinson and Waters (1987), the best methodology for studying the needs of any particular group of students is to use such methods as questionnaires, follow-up interviews, and collection of authentic texts. I use the modified

Likert scale questionnaire with 45 items, collecting students' comments on the issues, interviewing students from different social groups (private/public college students).

The questionnaires were put the modified six-point Likert scale. The slight modification was skewed towards axiological components (more valuable / less valuable/invaluable. I deliberately included "item 0" (Don't care at all, 0) in the Likert scale to find out areas of low or nil-priority. Other components of the scale are: (1), not important, but still matters, (2), slightly important, (3), valuable, (4), very valuable, (5) vitally needed.

### 1.3 Research questions

1. What are the differences between the two groups in terms of attitude towards learning English?
2. How and in what way can teachers ameliorate their teaching methods by knowing students' motivations and learning strategies?

## 2 Literature review

Samaie, Sahragard and Parhizkar (2006: 152) state that over the past few decades, there has been considerable research into how affective variables such as motivation, beliefs and anxiety can impact second language learning (Bown, 2006; Clément, Dörnyei, & Noels, 1994; Dörnyei, 2003; Gardner, 1985; Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope, 1986; Hurd, 2006). Students from different kind of colleges may have different attitudes, motivations towards learning foreign language. Students have their own interests when they study language, such as some may be fond of culture background, some long for learning foreign countries' literatures. Students usually want to focus on things they like, and learn them by heart. Those different kinds of interests can be affective parts to different learners. In words of Arnold and Brown (2000: 2): "attention to affective aspects can lead to more effective language learning". I believe that different motivations can lead to different results, and those affective parts can have an impact on learning language. Students would chose different methods that vary from others to target their individual learning needs, and these methods benefit students to improve

effectiveness in language study.

Despite that the diversity of needs of English language learners has long been acknowledged (Tarone & Yule, 1989). Teachers need to make sure students expectations and attitudes towards how they want to learn language and what they want to learn, so as to "reduce any gap between learner and teacher beliefs" (e.g. Horwitz, 1985; Wenden, 1986; McCargar, 1993; Peacock, 1999). What's more, having the awareness of students' purposes, teachers can help students to reach their individual expectations and self-fulfillment in an more effective way.

In addition, there is a growing consensus that "for teaching to be effective, attention to affect is crucial" (de Andrés, 2000, p.99). If teachers have reliable information on students' variables and teach students things they desire, students may have passion to learn and learn them seriously. By this, teaching and learning will be match closely, teachers' teaching effectiveness would be improved as students' learning effectiveness has promoted.

Xiao analyzed "Learning Needs Analysis of Chinese English Majors in a University Context". learning needs including their attitudes towards student-centered and traditional teaching approaches, culture learning in EFL program, attitudes towards authority in class, the main problems encountered in the course of their learning English, and their practice of language learning strategies. Xiao said "students are not inclined to reject indiscriminately the traditional way of teaching English." (Xiao, 2006a: 74-75). I focus on students' learning purposes in terms of learning English and try to find out differences between groups of students and differences between motivations and learning strategies and preferences.

Wong & Nunan did the research to "reveal key differences in learning strategy preferences, learning styles and patterns of language use." I aim at finding out what motivates private and public college students and what methodologies they adopt to satisfy their learning needs and achieve their goals. Students were categorized as 'more effective' or 'less effective' learners in Wong & Nunan (2011). In contrast, I divided all 67 students into

groups of Private English Majors VS Public English Majors; Private non-English Majors VS Public non-English Majors.

“Scholars in various camps of the discipline have laid emphasis on different situational or individual characteristics as the most important factor contributing to the process.”(Samaie, Sahragard and Parhizkar, 2006: 152). Therefore, one of my purposes of doing this research is to find out students’ personal motivations or learning needs to help ameliorate teaching methods in the basics of individual motivations according to analysis different purposes of students from different colleges.

### 3.1 Data analysis

I concentrate on the first five items related to exam-orientedness (See Appendix): to pass (1)CET4,6, (2)TEM4,8, (3)GRE,TOFEL,IELTS exams and (4) to pass all English tests during 4 years’ study and to get a college degree and (5) “I need to take some entrance exams in future.” As a result of the T-Test, all these 5 items got Sig. $>0.05$ , that means we need to focus on the top row and look at Sig.(2-tailed) to find out whether the Sig.(2-tailed)  $>0.05$ . All these 5 items’ Sig. (2-tailed)  $>0.05$ , that means: private and public college students’ attitudes towards these 5 items are almost the same, namely, there is little difference between these 2 types of colleges students. This phenomenon indicates that exams are private and public college students’ common motivations in terms of learning English.

Private and public college students’ views on master degree and PhD are nearly the same. Both private and public college students don’t regard master degree as a valuable factor that motivates them to learn English. Meanwhile, these 2 types of students also consider that studying up to the PhD level is not important. Public college students concern about Master’s degree and PhD more than private college students.

Their views on item 30 (to understand English songs, videos or movies) are different. Private college students got  $M=4.0000$ , while public college students got  $M=3.2979$ , these data

suggest private college students consider Item 30 as very valuable when learning English, and they tend to learn English for entertainment.

Item 31 (to read and understand English literature, newspapers), private college students got  $M=3.50$ , public college students got  $M=3.4043$ , namely, private college students care about understanding English literature, newspapers a little more than public college students.

It happens by chance that these 2 groups are not related, that is to say, their views on item 35 (I love to watch Oscar Academy Award and Grammy Award live, so good English listening ability is needed), because Sig. (2-tailed) =  $0.159 > 0.05$ . But, private college students ( $M=3.6000$ ) are motivated by this factor much more than public college students ( $M=2.9787$ ).

Item 36 (I want to talk with foreigners): Sig.(2-tailed)  $>0.05$ ,  $M=4.0500$  in the group of private college students, and  $M=3.7872$  in the group of public college students. Therefore, both of these 2 types of students want to learn English for talking to foreigners, they consider item 36 is a very valuable motivation in studying English.

Item 37 (I’d like to know more about western culture), Sig.(2-tailed) $<0.05$ , that shows these 2 types of students’ attitudes are different. Public college students consider that learning English to know more about western culture is a kind of very valuable purposes; in contrast, private college students think item 37 is not so significant.

When it comes to family factors, item 25 (parents force me to learn it), Sig. (2-tailed) $>0.05$ ,  $M=1.7021$  in the group of public college students,  $M=0.6000$  in the group of private college students. Private college students don’t care about their parents’ opinion at all, parents can’t force them to learn English, but for public college students, such kind of factors could not be important. Private and public college students opinions differ from each other regarding item 28 (One of my family members teaches English, so it is a good chance for me to learn), Sig.(2-tailed) $=0.050$ . Having relatives who teach English will not arise private college students’ interest in studying English, unless they have passion to learn it

(M=0.4500). However, if some family members teach English, public college students may take learning English into consideration (M=1.0638).

### 3.2 Discussion

#### 3.2.1 Pragmatic learners.

I consider private college students as a more pragmatic type of English learner. First, private college students pay attention to exam as much as what public college students do. Second, in the basics of exam-oriented settings, private college students learn English for and emphasize more the use of English for entertainment, e.g. understanding movies, talking to foreigners. And what's more, students all want to learn English in a more interesting way. They are supposed to use English in daily times frequently, fluently and accurately. That's exactly a good and practical way in which English learners can use to learn English well and more quickly.

3.2.2 Teachers can benefit from these findings in a way that help them to improve teaching methods. As private college students are fond of the entertainment use of English, teachers can use more multi-media in teaching. Teachers can let students watch movies in classes within limited time, so as to train students' listening skills. This will enable students to practice their oral English by listening actors tone and avoiding any dialect accent while speaking English.

Public college students are likely to pay more attention to acquiring knowledge of western culture and to preparing for getting Master's degree and PhD.

Private & public college students have the motivation to talk with foreigners, schools can hire foreign teachers who are well-educated. According to communicate with native speakers face to face, students' spoken English would be improved more quickly than just speak to Chinese English learners.

### 4 Conclusion

For all 67 students, academic advancement to PhD and family factors have little influence on learning English. For public college students, they focus on academic studies more than private college students,

who are more preoccupied with entertainment and it affects their learning agendas as they learn English for the purpose of entertainment much more than the public college students. Public college students consider knowledge of and competence in western culture visibly more important than the private college students. Defining students' motivations for learning English with precision, teachers could ameliorate their teaching methodologies in order to fulfill students' expectations, so as to improve teachers' teaching effectiveness.

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## 6. Appendix. Group Statistics and the Results of Independent Samples Test

### Group Statistics

	Type of school	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
1. Exam-oriented: I want to pass CET4,6,	1.00 Public	47	3.8298	1.34033	.19551
	2.00 Private	20	3.2000	1.57614	.35244
2. I want to pass TEM4,8,	1.00 Public	47	2.2340	1.92481	.28076
	2.00 Private	20	2.4500	2.03845	.45581

3.I want to pass GRE,TOFEL,IELTS	1.00 Public	47	2.1064	1.72241	.25124
	2.00 Private	20	2.0500	1.63755	.36617
4. I want to pass all English tests during 4 years study and to get a college degree	1.00 Public	47	3.6170	1.52591	.22258
	2.00 Private	20	3.9500	1.14593	.25624
5.I need to take some entrance exams in future	1.00 Public	47	2.9787	1.31032	.19113
	2.00 Private	20	3.0000	1.68585	.37697

### Independent Samples Test

	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means					95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	Lower	Upper
1.Exam-orientedness: I want to pass CET4,6,	.512	.477	1.669	65	.100	.62979	.37733	-.12379	1.38336
			1.563	31.270	.128	.62979	.40303	-.19191	1.45149
2.I want to pass TEM4,8	.205	.652	-.413	65	.681	-.21596	.52293	-1.26032	.82841
			-.403	34.124	.689	-.21596	.53534	-1.30376	.87184
3.I want to pass GRE,TOFEL,IELTS	.991	.323	.124	65	.901	.05638	.45334	-.84900	.96176
			.127	37.654	.900	.05638	.44407	-.84287	.95563
4. to pass all English tests during 4 years study and to get a college degree	3.582	.063	-.875	65	.385	-.33298	.38054	-1.09296	.42701
			-.981	47.354	.332	-.33298	.33941	-1.01565	.34969
5.I need to take some entrance exams in future	1.221	.273	-.056	65	.956	-.02128	.38186	-.78391	.74136
			-.050	29.226	.960	-.02128	.42265	-.88541	.84286