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Student Motivation: A Comparison and Investigation of ESL and EFL Environments

Andrea Dimitroff [a] *, Ashley Dimitroff* [b]*, Rebekah Alhashimi* [c]

a TOBB University of Education and Technology, Ankara 06510, Turkey
b TOBB University of Education and Technology, Ankara 06510, Turkey
c Qatar University, P.O Box 2713, Doha, Qatar

Abstract

Student motivation is a multifaceted topic that English Language Teachers continually discuss and investigate. Differences of the learning environment and whether the student is in the ESL or EFL context are of special interest in the present paper. This paper presents the findings of a survey related to the topic of motivation that was given to students in both the ESL (English as a Second Language) and EFL (English as a Foreign Language) contexts. Findings include observations about student motivation in each context, glimpses of classroom occurrences in each context as well as student and teacher reflections from each context. Motivation in the ESL and EFL contexts is also discussed and different factors of student motivation are considered. Implications for teaching that can be drawn out of this study are related to the student and teacher roles in the classroom, instructional design, and attention to intercultural communication.

Keywords: motivation; ESL/EFL environment; technology; classroom practices

1. Introduction

1.1. A basic definition of motivation

"Motivation" is a term that elicits perhaps endless responses as to its definition, function, and role. In the sphere of English Language Teaching (ELT), practitioners are most often concerned with student motivation and how it impacts learner success. However, many practitioners are left flummoxed as to what they could attempt to do on an individual and daily basis to have any effect on student motivation.

Initially, a basic definition of motivation requires consideration before any efforts of understanding student motivation can be made. An elementary but thorough definition is given by Dorneyi (2001): "'Motivation' is an abstract, hypothetical concept that we use to explain why people think and behave as they do" (p. 42). He also goes on to claim that motivation is "a basic aspect of the human mind" an aspect that includes contrasting both desires and rational thinking as well as cultural identity (p. 56). Fernandez and Canado draw attention to the fact that "motivation" is difficult to measure, observe, and

classify. They discuss that motivation is not easily recognized; a person's behavior and environment are the solitary aspects others can clearly observe. Motivation cannot be something directly observed, however, resides within each individual and has a reciprocal relationship with stimuli in the environment. It is also worth mentioning that motivation is just one component of behavior. Therefore, individuals should be mindful of such limitations when using the term "motivation" (2001). Motivation is also divided into subcategories as mentioned in Deci and Ryan's 1985 seminal work. They developed what is now known as Self - Determination Theory, in which they discuss the two main types of motivation: intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. Intrinsic motivation is when an individual carries out an action "for the inherent satisfaction of the activity itself". However, extrinsic motivation refers to doing an action for the purpose of a separate, tangible outcome (Deci & Ryan, 1985, p.71).

In view of these basic definitions of motivation, there remain questions such as "How does motivation impact language learning success?" and "How can teachers have an effect on these intricacies of motivation?". Some of these questions have been addressed in previous research on this subject.

1.2. Previous research related to language learner motivation

Chiew Fen Ng and Poh Kiat Ng point out the widely-spread belief that motivation is an enormous factor in language learning success (2015). The broadness of this belief is reflected in past studies. Notable previous research possessing insight into language learner motivation include the works of Dornyei (2001), Gardner (2006), and Deci and Ryan (1985). Each of the above-mentioned authors' extensive research significantly enriched the field of motivation and enhanced a practical understanding of the link between motivational theory and the classroom.

Dornyei discusses the theoretical reasoning behind motivation in language learning in general and concludes his book by giving a practical checklist of motivational strategies. Included in this list are items such as the promotion of group cohesiveness and the teacher's development of a personal relationship with the students (2001).

Furthermore, Gardner builds upon Deci and Ryan's (1985) work by asking that individuals think about two other types of motivation: language learning motivation and classroom learning motivation. He details that classroom learning motivation is more erratic in comparison to language learning motivation in that it chiefly is based upon the environment of the classroom itself (2006). While these four researchers' works contribute greatly to the study of motivation, none focus specifically on the ESL or EFL context.

Individuals who are familiar with the ESL context may argue that only students in the ESL context can truly be motivated. However, Fernandez and Canado's (2001) motivation study based on the EFL context proves that various levels of motivation exist in both the ESL and EFL context. They found that females surveyed higher levels of motivation than their male counterparts in all parts of the survey. In another study conducted in the EFL environment, Chen, Warden, and Chang (2005) emphasized that

most studies and ideas about motivation are understood through a North American or European perspective; consequently, their study perceives motivation through the Chinese perspective. Concerning the correlation of learner motivation and success, they argue, "Language learning theory has generally accepted the axiom that language learners with higher levels of motivation will be higher achievers. Finding what constitutes motivation for language learners in various cultural settings, however, remains an important task (p. 610)". This inquiry of factors catalyzing motivation should be a priority for ELT professionals, especially those who may be teaching in cultural contexts that are different from their own native cultural contexts. Chen, Warden, and Chang continue to the implications of their study by comparing the problem of a small incentive to use English in the EFL environment, with the growing demand for people to learn English for communication in the 21st century. Researchers and teachers need to understand these "local realities" before trying to apply the results of other motivation studies from different parts of the world (2005, p. 611).

From a similar perspective, D. Krieger (n.d.) emphasizes that the ESL and EFL environments are "quite distinct" and require differing approaches. He claims that the main differences stem from four areas, one of which was the motivation level of students. There is usually a difference in the type and degree of motivation between ESL and EFL. In EFL settings, he argues that motivation is typically more extrinsic. Students do not have that much real-life-access to English and often need to study English in order to pass exams. In the ESL context, however, intrinsic motivation is stronger because English is often more relevant to students' daily lives. The author discusses ways teachers can further motivate their students such as giving students choices, helping students see uses for English in their daily lives, giving them reasonable challenges, and aligning the curriculum with their interests. In EFL settings, teachers can try to increase and draw upon extrinsic factors to increase motivation such as evaluating students or awarding points for completing a task (n.d.). Most of these authors indicate that they think more studies on motivation at the university level should be done. Indeed, practitioners at the university level could reap great benefits from such further investigation.

1.3. The current study

The present study aims to investigate the impact of language environment on student motivation. Specifically, the question the researchers aim to answer in this study is as follows:

Is there a significant difference between ESL and EFL learners in their attitude to English and their level of engagement in English classes?

2. Method

2.1. Research design

A mixed method research design was employed through the use of an online survey. The survey included initial closed-ended multiple choice and rating-scale, quantitative-based questions followed by open-ended short answer, qualitative-based questions. This was in order to collect both the statistics as well as the personal views related to the students' experiences, or as Creswell (2012) stated, the

"numbers" as well as the "stories" related to the issue. While observing how the participants answered the initial, more quantitative-based questions about their language learning history, participants were classified into groups as to which language environment they had studied. Once the learning environment was identified for each participant, the researchers turned to the later, open-ended qualitative questions.

This was done by analyzing participants' answers to the later (open-ended), qualitative-based questions. Like Creswell (2012) and Maynes & Hatt (2013), the researchers of this project held to the mindset that the participants are capable of providing valuable perspectives and ideas related to this topic. The authors of this study are aware of the fact that using a mixed method such as numerical data and participants' self-reporting create various study limitations. These concerns, as well as further research suggestions, are addressed in the limitations and recommendations section.

2.2. Participants

The participants were 222 students of English as a Second or Foreign language who are or were studying English in order to prepare for proficiency exam such as the TOEFL or IELTS or otherwise going to study English in an academic setting such as a university. The participants included persons of various age groups, educational backgrounds, and nationalities.

The participant-age ranges were: 18 to 24 years (88.29% of participants), 25 to 34 (9.46% of participants), 35 to 44 years (1.35% of participants), 45 to 54 years (0.45% of participants), and 75 years or older (0.45% of participants). The gender of participants was recorded through a short-answer section as a subdivision of the age question. One hundred and eighteen participants reported themselves to be female, and one hundred and four of them reported as male.

The majority of participants (83.3%) reported that they were studying in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context. Countries considered to be an EFL context are countries in which English is not the language spoken by the majority of the population. Participants listed EFL countries such as Turkey, Columbia, Saudi Arabia, Taiwan, Panama, and China. The remainder of participants (16.7%) reported that they were studying English in an English as a Second Language (ESL) context. Countries considered to be an ESL context are countries in which English is the majority language: participants listed ESL countries such as the United States and the United Kingdom.

Regarding the purpose of the study, the majority of participants (27.03%) reported they were studying "to get a good/better job". Second to the majority was the group of participants who said they were studying "to improve my life". The next largest group (19.82%) reported their purpose was "to study an English speaking university", followed by participants whose goal it was "to pass a proficiency exam like the TOEFL". Lastly, a small group of participants (2.70%) selected "other". "Other" was described as various answers including "to teach English" and "all of the above…"

2.3. Data Collection

The tool used to collect data was an online survey which was sent to participants through both email and online educational applications. As mentioned above, the survey consisted of closed-ended,

multiple choice questions (qualitative measures) and open-ended, short answer questions (qualitative measures). The survey consisted of three parts: personal information about the participants, information about the participants' reflections on learning experiences, and finally, the participants' reflections on teachers and technology in relation to motivation.

The participant information portion consisted of four demographic questions concerning participant age, gender, country of study, and the purpose of the study. The results from the demographic questions are listed above. The section related to information about participants' learning experiences consisted of four questions. The first question was concerning the students' attitude about learning English; this was a Likert scale based question ranging from "I hate learning English" to "I love learning English". The second question was an open-ended question requiring students to list the "best countries or country for learning English". The third question was a rating scale of students' level of engagement while learning; this was a Likert scale based question ranging from "always" to "never". Lastly, the fourth question was open-ended and required students to list "what makes a class engaging?". It was from these questions - specifically, the first question about attitude and the third question about the level of engagement - that the researchers sought to gauge students' motivation. These questions aligned with the claims of Dorneyi:

> The current spirit in motivational psychology (and in psychology in general) is characterised by yet another theoretical orientation, the cognitive approach, which places the focus on how the individual's conscious attitudes, thoughts, beliefs, and interpretations of events influence their behaviour; that is how mental processes are transformed into action" (2001, p. 121).

Whether individuals decide to do something is determined first by their beliefs about the values of the action and this can allow motivation to be more clearly seen. The final section that was devoted to participants' reflections on teachers and technology in relation to motivation was comprised of two questions. The first question in this section was an open-ended question that participants had to complete by describing ways in which teachers could "help students learn". The second question required students to rate their beliefs about technology according to the following scale: "Technology doesn't help me learn", "Technology doesn't influence my learning", Technology helps me concentrate and learn new concepts", and "Technology is essential for me. I feel like I can't learn without it." This question included an open-ended "Why (please explain)" field.

2.4. Data Analysis

The data gathered from the initial closed-ended questions was first descriptively analyzed by the online survey service Survey Monkey. Then, statistical analyses were performed to investigate the possible relationship between the participants' level of reported attitude towards learning English and their environment as well as their reported level of engagement while learning English and their environment. The analyses included two Mann-Whitney tests and a Spearman's rank-order correlation, all for ordinal data. These tests are described below.

The data gathered from question eight, concerning engaging elements of a class, and question nine, participant-recommended teacher approaches to facilitate student learning, were analysed thematically by the researchers. Thematic analysis was used in order to observe and understand possible trends in the data set that could be informative in answering the research question of this present study. For this thematic analysis, the data were divided into groups; first, question groups based on the participants' responses to each question. Then those groups were further divided into subgroups based on category. Each group of comments was analyzed and compared against one another to see what trends could be discovered in the data. From each question, the top five most common answer groups were considered by the researchers to be desirable class elements and teacher behaviors. The researchers decided to collect the five most common response topics because they thought five topics would effectively display the range of participant preference.

3. Results

In the results section, summarize the collected data and the analysis performed on those data relevant to the discourse that is to follow. Report the data in sufficient detail to justify your conclusions. Mention all relevant results, including those that run counter to expectation; be sure to include small effect sizes (or statistically nonsignificant findings) when theory predicts large (or statistically significant) ones. Do not hide uncomfortable results by omission. Do not include individual scores or raw data with the exception, for example, of single-case designs or illustrative examples. In the spirit of data sharing (encouraged by APA and other professional associations and sometimes required by funding agencies), raw data, including study characteristics and individual effect sizes used in a meta-analysis, can be made available on supplemental online archives. Discussing the implications of the results should be reserved for presentation in the Discussion section.

3.1. Results from the Initial Survey Questions

As previously stated, the initial questions in the survey were closed-ended questions that were descriptively analyzed by the online-survey service and then analyzed by the researchers. The results from the initial questions' statistical analysis are reported below.

3.1.1. A comparsion of student attitude

The statistical analyses were conducted using SPSS. Initially, the first Mann-Whitney test for ordinal data with two independent samples was conducted. This was to investigate whether or not there was a significant difference in the attitudes of the two environmental groups. No statistically significant difference was found between the ESL and EFL learners in their attitude to English, Mann-Whitney U = 3132, p = 0.387. The mean attitude had a slightly higher value in the ESL group.

3.1.2. A comparison of student engagement

A second Mann-Whitney test for ordinal data with two independent samples was conducted. This was to investigate whether or not there was a significant difference in the engagement of the two groups. A statistically significant difference was found between the ESL and EFL learners in their level of engagement in English classes, Mann-Whitney U = 2724, p = 0.037. A higher percentage of ESL

participants (70%) reported being always or almost always engaged versus 64% of the EFL participants. The mean value of engagement was 3.05 for the ESL group and 2.75 for the EFL group.

3.1.3. The correlation of attitude and engagment

The final statistical analysis that was conducted was the Spearman's rank-order correlation for ordinal data. This was to determine whether or not there was a correlation between the participants' level of attitude and reported the level of engagement. In both groups a significant positive correlation was found between learners' attitude to English and their level of engagement (ESL group: $r^s = 0.383$, $p = 0.019$, EFL group: $r^s = 0.455$, $p < 0.001$). In both groups, more positive attitudes were associated with higher levels of engagement in English classes and vice versa. This trend was stronger in the EFL group, where the value of the Spearman rho coefficient was higher (0.455) than in the ESL group (0.383).

3.2. Results from the later open-ended survey questions

As stated above, the data gathered from question eight and question nine were analysed thematically by the researchers. Thematic analysis was used in order to observe and understand possible trends in the data set that could be informative in answering the research question of this present study.

3.2.1. Elements of an "engaging" class

Discussions

"Discussions" was the most frequent answer given by 22% of participants concerning elements of an engaging class. One male student studying in the United States commented, "The in-class discussions or debate on a hot topic involving critical thinking, always interest[s] me." Other students gave "speaking" as an activity that enhanced their engagement in class.

Games

"Games" was the second most frequent element of an engaging class and was listed by 16% of participants. Echoing the idea of communication as the goal of learning, a female student from Turkey explained, "I like speaking. And also games are a good way for me [to learn] English." Also concerning the element of in-class games, students mentioned various technology-enabled games such as Quizlet and Kahoot.

The teacher

The third most common element of an engaging class was the teacher. Before listing the teacher as an engaging element, participants often included an adjective such as "a 'good' teacher", "a 'smart' teacher", or a teacher "who spoke English". Other characteristics of engaging were teachers who were "funny" or "interesting" and who had good "discipline".

Classmates

The fourth most frequently given element of an engaging class was classmates or "friends" in class. Participants mentioned ways classmates could motivate each other by "always" speaking English in

class, by sharing "different life views", and by participating in group activities like games and discussions.

Usefulness for real life

Lastly, the fifth most common element of an engaging class was the classes relevance to or "usefulness" in participants lives. A male student from Taiwan argued, " An interesting class should teach something is beneficial for my career and life." Other participants explained they felt more motivated to learn when learning intersected with their hobbies, when the skill or topic in class could be directly applied to their lives, and when things they learned in class related to their future careers.

3.2.2. Participant-recommended teacher approaches to facilitate student learning

Games and fun activities

The most common approach to facilitate learning given by students was "games and fun activities"; this answer was given by 22% of participants. Echoing several other participant responses, a male student from Turkey stated, "To make the lesson enjoyable helps me to be interested and playing some games in English and speaking exercises are really helpful." Other students mentioned the importance of utilizing humor in the classroom and conducting class in a way that was not "boring".

Teacher behaviors

The second most common approach given by 20% of participants was teacher behavior; included in this category are aspects such as the teacher's professionalism and relationship with the students. Participants listed effective teacher qualities such as: "motivating", "patient", "encouraging", "friendly", "relaxed", "professional", able to explain objectives effectively, and able to answer students' questions effectively. Furthermore, several participants argued that the teacher should be able to "help" students by providing resources for learning, teaching students life skills, and encouraging students to use English increasingly in their lives. A female student from Turkey contended, "When teachers love and respect their job, their students will learn anyway." Generally, participants voiced the idea that teachers must value their professional role as the teacher and must value their relationship with their students.

Student speaking and participation

The third most common approach given by 14% of participants was student speaking and participation. A female student from Turkey stated, "They [teachers] can encourage students to speak or make mistakes because if they don't make mistakes they couldn't learn. They should be patient." Similarly, many participants emphasized the need for teachers to encourage student participation and speaking in class, both formally and informally. One participant commented that "students should speak more than the teacher.".

Instructional methods

The fourth most common approach was the utilization of various instructional methods. This approach was given by 10 % of participants. Effective instructional methods listed by participants include "demonstration", oral repetition, providing various examples, explaining expectations, and

using students' native language when explaining grammar. A female student from Turkey voiced the importance of teachers employing instructional variety; she stated, "Teachers can help students [by] support[ing] them...they should try new styles of learning. Because sometimes [the] style that is used [is not] suitable for someone else." Similarly, other participants recommended the use of visual instructional materials and the personalization of course content.

Aspects of the teacher's speech

The fifth most common approach given by 9% of participants was aspects of the teacher's speech. Aspects of the teacher's speech relate specifically to how the teachers speak and interact with students linguistically; this should be differentiated from the earlier discussed teacher behaviors, which related to the teacher's general conduct in class and professional role as the facilitator of learning. Concerning best approaches to facilitate learning, a male student from Turkey stated, "The best way is speaking. If a teacher speaks English during the lesson, the student can improve his/her pronunciation and listening skills." Characteristics of an effective speech given by participants include: speaking clearly and slowly, speaking with students individually, using English, and asking questions.

4. Discussion

4.1. Interpretation Using Both Data Sets

Through both the statistical and thematic analysis of both the close-ended and open-ended questions, the researchers were able to propose certain interpretations and, possible implications suggested in the data.

From an initial view of the participants reported attitude and engagement levels, it is interesting to note that there does not appear to be a significant difference between the ESL and EFL groups in terms of attitude, but there is an interesting difference between the groups in terms of engagement: In the ESL group, no participants reported that they "never" felt interested or engaged in learning, whereas 2.7% of EFL participants reported feeling so. The same conclusion was reached through the use of the Mann Whitney tests.

The researchers then were inquisitive as to whether there was a relationship between the reported level of attitude towards English and engagement while learning English. Interestingly, the Spearman's rank-order correlation for ordinal data indicated that there was a positive correlation between the two. That the relationship appeared stronger in the ESL group. The fact that there is a correlation implies the following - if teachers are able to increase either students' attitudes towards learning English or their feeling of engagement while learning, teachers could increase the other factor, either attitude or engagement. This, in turn, increases motivation as a whole. Certain possible specific implications are further discussed below.

Thematic analysis of the data gathered from question eight, concerning engaging elements of a class, and question nine, participant-recommended teacher approaches to facilitate student learning, revealed common participant ideas and convictions about each queried component of engaging learning processes.

The top five most popular answer categories for elements of an engaging class were gathered and recorded by researches, as listed above. The two most popular answers, discussions and games, are both classroom activities that require a high level of student participation and use of the target language. Generally, participants seemed to report that the greater amount of participation and language use increased or maintained their level of engagement in class. The third and fourth most popular answers regarding the teacher and classmates can be seen as facilitators of participation and target language use. Participants described an engaging teacher as one who encourages students' use of the target language in and through speaking and communicative tasks. Participants explained the benefits of classmates who speak English frequently and augment class discussions with diverse ideas. As the fifth most popular element of an engaging class, participants listed the class or activity's usefulness in everyday life. This topic relates to participants' authentic use and need of the target language, far beyond the walls of the classroom or the confines of a proficiency test. This final topic can be seen as an extension or fulfillment of the earlier topics of participation and language use; participating in real-life language scenarios with real "speakers" of the language is the ultimate language task that requires speaking and elements only practiced in the language classroom.

Along the elements of an engaging class, the top five teacher approaches to facilitate student learning were thematically analyzed by the researchers. Specifically, these were ways in which teachers could "help students learn" according to participants. The two most popular approaches participants listed were the implementation of games and fun activities in class and effective teacher behaviors. There is a logical progression from participants' given elements of an engaging class to participants' suggested approaches of teachers; games and fun activities are engaging to students and therefore should be implemented by teachers. Also, if teachers are the main facilitators of communicative activities, they must be worthy of emulation by students. Students' participation and use of the target language should be stimulated by the aforementioned effective teacher behaviors. This finding concurs with the importance Dorneyi attributes to teacher behaviors; he explains, "almost everything a teacher does in the classroom has a motivational influence on students" (2001, p. 384). The third most popular approach was the utilization of student speaking activities and participation in class. Once again, this approach mirrors the previously given response of discussion and games as elements of an engaging class. The fourth and fifth most popular approaches for facilitating learning were instructional methods and aspects of the teacher's speech. The utilization of a variety of instructional methods, modes of presentation, and the exemplary use of English for communicative purposes were all traits of "engaging" teachers according to participants.

5. Conclusions

5.1. Possible implications

The present study aimed to investigate the impact of language environment on student motivation. Specifically, the researchers sought to answer the following question:

Is there a significant difference between ESL and EFL learners in their attitude to English and their level of engagement in English classes?

The analysis indicated that when comparing students in the EFL and ESL contexts, the environment is not one of the chief factors affecting student motivation. However, students do view the ESL environment as more cohesive for learning English; this is seen in the way participants in the ESL context reported a slightly higher level of engagement than did the participants in the EFL environment. Also, statistical analysis revealed that, regardless of environment, more positive attitudes were associated with higher levels of engagement in English classes and vice versa. In regards the role of the teacher, participants reported that teacher behavior comes in second only to games and fun activities as approaches to facilitate student learning. Lastly, concerning methods to increase motivation, participants reported the most that discussions were the most engaging but that classmates, games, and the teacher also positively affect students' classroom engagement.

Implications for language teachers can be derived from the previously discussed analysis and participant reflections. Primarily, teachers must strive to encourage student learning regardless of language environment; globalization may render the context irrelevant. Through tools such as the Internet, teachers and students in the EFL environment currently have access to realia and authentic materials which can be utilized to enliven English learning. Instead of drawing attention to the lack of English in the EFL environment, teachers should attempt to make the language as relevant as possible to students. Since a correlation of attitude and engagement was discovered, teachers should consider that fostering more positive students attitudes may also increase student engagement and vice versa.

Secondly, teachers should evaluate their classroom behaviors and ways of speaking. From participant reflections, it is seen that effective teacher behaviors such as professionalism, positive interactions with students, and exemplary use of English are all tools that can be used to enhance student participant and use of the target language. Moreover, as teachers labor to enhance student participation and language use, they will likely enhance student motivation.

Another implication for teachers is the employment of technology. Participants indicated games and fun activities as both an element of an engaging class and an approach for facilitating learning. Included in this recommendation were technology-enabled games, such as Quizlet and Kahoot. Also, participants listed the use of visual aids as an effective instructional method with which teachers facilitate learning; programs such as PowerPoint, Google Slides, and Prezi are just a few technological applications teachers can utilize to provide visual aids and instructional variety in lessons.

In congruence with participant reflections, teachers should facilitate communicative activities. Such activities include but are not limited to: discussions, speaking games and activities, inquiry-based learning, and interactive listening and reading activities.

Finally, teachers must learn what motivates students. Several participants commented that they felt most engaged in the English classroom when what they were learning related to their lives and future careers. Others shared that they experience higher engagement when the topics of class intersected with their hobbies or leisure activities. Teachers should work to integrate elements of students' lives and passions into the curriculum.

5.2. Survey limitations

This survey was limited possibly due to its mixed-method (partial open-response) design, by the lack of preliminary testing prior to designing the survey, and by the possibility of several confounding factors. While the mixed method design allowed the researchers a wide glimpse into the participants' views, other methods, such as replacing the closed-ended questions with personal interviews or all open-ended survey questions could have given the researchers further understanding of the participants' views. While the survey questions provided rich and informative data, some of the items could have been more clearly defined. Some of the closed-ended questions seemed to have possibly contained aspects of ambiguity, such as the order of ranking. Finally, due to the diversity of research participants, confounding factors may have impacted participants answers. For example, participants from the EFL group could have had significant exposure to the ESL environments. Examples of such exposure could have been having native English speaking friends, or going to visit several English speaking environments at different points in time. This limitation stems partially from the fact that the data analysis was completed ad hoc. In the future, the researchers plan to design surveys in a less exploratory way, with more defined measures and possible outcomes in mind.

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