

# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

Motivation in language learning has been widely recognized by language teachers and researchers as one of the key factors that influence the rate and success of learning the target language (Dörnyei, 1998). Over the past few decades, an increasing number of studies on second and foreign language (L2) education have examined the role of motivation in language learning. The results show that motivation is an influential factor affecting L2 learning and achievements, and that L2 teachers have a desire to motivate their students (Oxford & Shearin, 1994; Crookes & Schmidt, 1991).

In addition to learning motivation, learning strategies proved to be influential in language learning (Ehrman & Oxford, 1989). Language learning strategies have been emphasized and studied extensively in the hope of better understanding the elements required for successful language learning. According to Oxford (1990a), students who are more motivated tend to use more strategies than those who are less motivated. Research has also found that good learners use learning strategies more frequently than poor learners (e.g., Bremner, 1999; Chen, 2002; Green & Oxford, 1995; Naiman et al., 1978; Rubin, 1975; Wharton, 2000). Besides, some studies (e.g., Chamot & Kupper, 1989; Oxford & Shearin, 1994) show that both learning motivation and learning strategies play a significant role in successful language learning, which suggests a need to explore the links between the two important variables (Chang & Huang, 1999).

Quite a number of researchers in Taiwan have also endeavored to examine the relationships between learners' English learning motivation and English achievements. For example, Hsu (1993), Chang (1997), and Chang (2003) found in their studies that a strong link does exist between learners' English learning motivation and their English achievements. Furthermore, in view of an increasing emphasis on learning English in Taiwan, students' learning motivation and learning strategies are closely monitored. Generally speaking, students who have stronger motivation or better use of learning

strategies while learning the target language often show better results (e.g., Chang, 1997; Chang & Huang, 1999; Chen, 2002; Yang, 1992, 1996). Chang and Huang (1999) pointed out that learning motivation and use of learning strategies are related to each other and suggested that large and different samples be used to examine the stability of the relationships between motivation and strategies in future research.

### **Statement of the Problems**

In Taiwan, English education has recently gained considerable attention from parents and teachers. As for the history of English education, English has been taught as a foreign language for more than fifty years (Chang & Lai, 1978). However, compared with the emphases on senior high school students' English learning, vocational high school (VHS) students' English learning has long been neglected (Shih, 1999). Only few researchers, such as Chang, (1993), Chen (2002), Lin (1994), Teng (2000), and Wu (2004), attempted to investigate VHS students' English learning motivation or learning strategies. For a long time, VHS students have been questioned about their proficiency in English and if such a disadvantage in English might become the obstacle for advanced learning when they enter Technology College (Lin, 2003). Such speculation was verified in Lin's (2003) study on the comparison of Taiwan's senior high school and VHS students' English learning. His study found VHS students have many disadvantages in English learning under the current educational policy. His suggestions for improving the inferior English learning environment of VHS students are briefly summarized in the following paragraph.

First, the Ministry of Education (MOE) should rearrange VHS students' curriculum. More English classes for VHS students are highly recommended. Second, teachers and curriculum designers can take more English learning materials into consideration. It is hoped that with diverse and multifaceted learning materials, VHS students' English achievement will be better and their proficiency level will be elevated. Third, language educators should raise VHS students' English learning motivation and

rebuild their confidence in English learning. Furthermore, Lin (1994) urged the need to clarify the reasons why VHS students do not have sufficient English proficiency. For this purpose, he conducted a comparative study on English teaching in general and vocational high schools. The findings revealed that there are significant differences in grammatical, lexical and reading competence between general and VHS students. Shih (1999) conducted a project on improving VHS English teaching and found that there are lots of disadvantages in VHS English teaching, such as materials, teaching methods, and tuition hours.

In view of the above studies, research on examining and improving VHS students' English learning is imperatively needed. Although there are many studies dealing with English learning motivation and English learning strategies, most of the participants of these studies in Taiwan focus on elementary, junior high and senior high school students. Furthermore, in most studies on language or English learning strategies, the questionnaire items are too general. The strategy items developed by foreign researchers might not be appropriate for English learners in Taiwan.

Since the 1980s, studies on language learning strategies training have started to develop. Generally, the results indicate that successful and less successful language learners use strategies differently (Rubin, 1975; Naiman et al., 1978; Green & Oxford, 1995; Lin, 2000; Chen, 2002). Researchers also hope that those identified strategies employed by successful language learners can be transferred or taught to less successful language learners through training or instructions (O'Malley et al., 1985; Bremner, 1999; Cheng, 2003). Therefore, those students who have never been trained or instructed to be familiar with language learning strategies are just using some "ways" or "methods" to help them get higher scores in tests or become better learners either inside or outside the classroom. Since students have no knowledge about what language learning strategies are, the researcher of this study defines these ways or methods to help them become better English learners as "English learning behaviors".

## **Purpose of the Study**

Given the aforementioned problems related to learning and teaching English in vocational high schools in Taiwan, the purpose of this study is to examine VHS students' English learning motivation and their English learning behaviors both inside and outside the classroom as well as the relationships between their English learning motivation and behaviors. With a better understanding of VHS students' English learning motivation and learning behaviors, teachers may better motivate their students to learn English and also help them learn English more effectively both in and outside class. In addition, with regards to VHS students, a better understanding of their own English learning motivation and learning behaviors may help them to better evaluate the condition and the process of their English learning in the VHS learning contexts in Taiwan. Since VHS education has long been neglected (Shih, 1999) in Taiwan, it is hoped that the results of this study will draw more attention from the MOE and other authorities concerned with improving learning and teaching English in vocational high schools in Taiwan.

## **Research Questions**

In view of the purpose of the study, the researcher tried to seek answers to the following questions in the hopes of contributing to VHS English teaching in Taiwan.

1. What is VHS students' self-rated degree of English learning motivation? Are there any significant differences in their English learning motivation between students of higher and lower English achievement levels?
2. What are VHS students' self-rated in-class English learning behaviors? Are there any significant differences in the in-class English learning behaviors between students of higher and lower English achievement levels?
3. What are VHS students' self-rated outside-class English learning behaviors? Are there any significant differences in the outside-class English learning behaviors between students of higher and lower English achievement levels?

4. Is there a significant relationship between VHS students' in-class and outside-class English learning behaviors?
5. Is there a systematic, significant relationship between VHS students' English learning motivation and their in-class English learning behaviors? Does such a relationship vary according to VHS students' English learning achievement levels?
6. Is there a systematic, significant relationship between VHS students' English learning motivation and their outside-class English learning behaviors? Does such a relationship vary according to VHS students' English learning achievement levels?

### **Definition of Terms**

To ensure a consistent use and understanding of the terms used throughout this study, some key terms are defined in alphabetical order for an easy access as follows:

1. Attitudes towards leaning English: These attitudes refer to students' positive or negative feelings or thoughts about the task of learning English. In this study the participants' attitudes towards learning English are measured by eight 5-point Likert-scale questionnaire items adapted from the AMTB (see Appendix B).
2. Basic Personal Background Information Questionnaire: It refers to a 10-item questionnaire designed by the researcher to collect the participants' basic background information, especially the details about their years of English learning, how many English classes they have in school, how much extra time they spend in English learning, how they evaluate their English proficiency, and their feelings about English classes (see Appendix B).
3. Desire to learn English: It refers to students' inner drive that facilitates their seeking and grasping opportunities to learn English. In this study, the participants' desire to learn English is measured by eight 5-point Likert-scale questionnaire items adapted from the AMTB (see Appendix B).
4. English Learning Behaviors Questionnaire: It refers to a 5-point Likert-scale questionnaire containing forty-eight items in total, partly adapted from the SILL

and partly designed by the researcher of this study to examine English learning behaviors. It consists of two categories, namely, in-class and outside-class English learning behaviors. In-class English learning behaviors are further divided into three subcategories, including memory-based, cognition-based, and in-class affect-based English learning behaviors. Outside-class English learning behaviors are also divided into three subcategories, including individual schoolwork-oriented, individual non-schoolwork-oriented, and interactive English learning behaviors. Each of the items rates responses from “hardly true of me” (1 point), “not quite true of me” (2 points), “slightly true of me” (3 points), “true of me” (4 points), “very true of me” (5 points) (see Appendix B).

5. English learning motivation: English learning motivation refers to the extent to which an individual works or strives to learn English because of a desire to do so and the satisfaction experienced in the learning activity (Gardner, 1985).
6. English Learning Motivation Questionnaire: It refers to a 5-point Likert-scale questionnaire containing 24 questionnaire items in total, partly adapted from the AMTB and partly designed by the researcher of this study, to assess participants’ English learning motivation. It consists of the following three categories: desire to learn English, motivational intensity, and attitudes towards learning English, with eight items for each category. Each of the questionnaire item rates participants’ responses from “hardly true of me” (1 point), “not quite true of me” (2 points), “slightly true of me” (3 points), “true of me” (4 points), “very true of me” (5 points) (see Appendix B).
7. In-class English learning behaviors: These behaviors refer to what students do in their English classes to help themselves learn English. Such behaviors may be referred to as learning strategies by some scholars; however, learning behaviors are more practical and better reflect what English learners do in English classes. These behaviors are further classified into the following three subcategories: memory-based, cognition-based, and affect-based English learning behaviors. In this study

the participants' in-class English behaviors are measured by twenty-four 5-point Likert-scale questionnaire items adapted from the SILL (see Appendix B).

8. In-class affect-based English learning behaviors: These behaviors refer to what students do to regulate their emotions, motivation, and attitudes, such as lowering anxiety and encouraging themselves (Oxford, 1990). In this study in-class affect-based English learning behaviors are measured by eight 5-point Likert-scale questionnaire items adapted from the SILL (see Appendix B).
9. In-class cognition-based English learning behaviors: These behaviors refer to what students do to comprehend and produce language by different means, such as practicing, receiving and sending messages, analyzing and reasoning, and creating structure for input and output (Oxford, 1990). In this study in-class cognition-based English learning behaviors are measured by eight 5-point Likert-scale questionnaire items adapted from the SILL (see Appendix B).
10. In-class memory-based English learning behaviors: These behaviors refer to what students do to help themselves store and retrieve new English materials. In this study, these behaviors are measured by eight 5-point Likert-scale questionnaire items adapted from the SILL (see Appendix B).
11. Language learning strategies: They refer to a set of strategic behaviors, steps, or actions taken by language learners to assist acquisition, storage, retrieval, and use of new information in order to facilitate their language learning.
12. Motivational intensity: It refers to the amount of effort that learners are willing to exercise or invest in learning a target language. In this study the participants' motivational intensity in learning English is measured by eight 5-point Likert-scale questionnaire items adapted from the AMTB (see Appendix B).
13. Outside-class English learning behaviors: These behaviors refer to what students do outside their English classes to help themselves learn English either for pleasure or for better academic achievement. These behaviors are further classified into the

following three subcategories: individual schoolwork-oriented, individual non-schoolwork-oriented, and interactive English learning behaviors. In this study the participants' outside-class English behaviors are measured by twenty-four 5-point Likert-scale questionnaire items adapted from the SILL (see Appendix B).

14. Outside-class individual English learning behaviors—non-schoolwork-oriented: These behaviors refer to what students do individually outside their English classes in learning English, which is not directly for better academic achievements in English but mainly for personal enjoyment. In this study these behaviors are measured by eight 5-point Likert-scale questionnaire items adapted from the SILL (see Appendix B).
15. Outside-class individual English learning behaviors—schoolwork-oriented: These behaviors refer to what students do individually outside their English classes in learning English, which is mainly for better academic achievements in English. In this study these behaviors are measured by eight 5-point Likert-scale questionnaire items adapted from the SILL (see Appendix A).
16. Outside-class interactive English learning behaviors: These behaviors refer to what students do with others outside their English classes to help themselves learn English. In this study these behaviors are measured by eight 5-point Likert-scale questionnaire items adapted from the SILL (see Appendix A).
17. The Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL): The SILL is a questionnaire designed by Oxford to assess the frequency of language learning strategy use. The structure of the SILL is based on Oxford's strategy-classifying system, according to which English learning strategies are classified into six categories, including memory, cognitive, metacognitive, compensation, affective, and social strategies (Oxford, 1989).
18. Vocational high school (VHS) students in Taiwan: They refer to students who enter vocational high schools after completing their three-year compulsory junior



high school education. VHS students have to decide on their school majors before they enter the schools they eventually attend. In addition to their majors, they also have to take general required courses such as Chinese, English, and mathematics.

### **Significance of the Study**

First of all, studying VHS students' English learning motivation and English learning behaviors in Taiwan will provide valuable information to students, teachers, parents, and curriculum designers. Second, compared with general high school students, VHS students face more difficulties in learning English and they do not have a satisfying English learning experience. The findings of this study may reveal possible reasons that caused such phenomena. Third, once we better understand what may have caused VHS students' difficulties in learning English, solutions can be brought forward. Fourth, according to the results of the motivation questionnaire, teachers may design courses and activities to raise their students' English learning motivation. Fifth, with the knowledge of the relationships between English learning motivation and in-class as well as outside-class English learning behaviors, teachers and educational authorities concerned may have a better understanding of how English learning motivation affects learners' English learning behaviors and vice versa.

Finally, the researcher hopes that the findings of the study can provide empirical data for English practitioners to better understand the real English learning situations of VHS students in Taiwan. It is also hoped that the findings can help VHS students become more motivated English learners and enhance their English achievements at school as well as their overall English proficiency in the long run.