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Socio-Psychological Predictors of EFL Learners' English Language Proficiency

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Socio-Psychological Predictors of EFL Learners' English Language Proficiency

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Keywords: socio-psychological variables, stepwise multiple regression analysis, self-confidence, technological institute students, *efl*.

I. INTRODUCTION

Socio-psychological variables have been widely discussed in second language acquisition since the 1970s. Considerable research has established a strong correlation between socio-psychological variables and second language acquisition (e. g. Clement et al., 1994; Dornyei, 1990a; Dornyei, 1990b; Gardner, 1979; Gardner, 1982; Gardner, 1983; Gardner & Lambert, 1972; Labrie & Clement, 1986). With the increased amount of socio-psychological research in a foreign language milieu (e.g. Clement, Dornyei, & Noels, 1994; Dornyei, 1990a; Dornyei 1990b; Lin & Warden, 1998; Rahman, 2005; Warden & Lin, 2000, 2005), most research has focused only on one or two variables, including attitudes or different motivation types. However, social and psychological variables in an Asian EFL context have seldom been addressed. This study extends the finding of Hu's (2001) study by contrasting different participants to determine English language proficiency attainment of EFL learners, based on socio-psychological factors in an Asian context.

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a) Background of the Problem

As English is a compulsory subject taught in Taiwanese secondary education, language proficiency is required for high school and university admissions. Tertiary education in Taiwan is categorized into universities and technological institutes. Students admitted to universities come mainly from senior high schools, while most students admitted to technological institutes come from vocational high schools. English language proficiency of most technological institute students is inferior to that of university students because students with high scores on their high school entrance examinations can select which senior high school they want to attend. However, students scoring low on those examinations normally choose to study at vocational high schools (Hu, 2007, 2011).

As is widely assumed, low academic achievement often results in a diminished sense of self-efficacy. Low self-confidence, deactivated motivation, and other interrelated variables may subsequently lead to unsatisfactory English language acquisition skills. Thus, further investigating the relationship between socio-psychological variables and English language proficiency of Taiwanese technological institute students is of worthwhile interest.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

a) Socio-psychological variables

Gardner and Lambert (1959) successfully explained second/foreign language acquisition from a socio-psychological perspective for the first time. Their studies posited that the motivation for language learners to learn a second/foreign language hinge on their attitude towards the target language society and their orientation during language learning. The twelve years study in the Philippines and the United States examined how attitude and motivation influence language proficiency attainment. Notably, Gardner and Lambert (1972) identified two orientations towards language learning: integrative and instrumental, which were based on two clusters of attitudes. Socio/affective or socio-psychological perspectives have received increasing attention (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Maple, 1982; Oller et al., 1977; Schumann, 1978; Spolsky, 1969; Stauble, 1978). Gardner (1985) postulated that second language acquisition combined sociological and psychological variables by intertwining individuals and cross-cultural

interactions. Ramage (1990) found that his study participants, high school students, when positively and intrinsically motivated to learn, wanted to attend college. Chang (1997) demonstrated that as opposed to extrinsic motivation, intrinsic motivation provided more potential in second language learning through means of creativity and conceptual learning, ultimately fostering an intellectual desire for challenges, as well as a sense of accomplishment. Rahman (2005) investigated attitude and motivation orientations of Bangladeshi undergraduate students in a private university towards learning English. According to their results, students focused on English for its utilitarian value, as opposed to integrative motivation. That study further demonstrated that the learners studied English for "instrumental" reasons, as opposed to previous studies, which indicated that "integrative motivation" was the dominant motivational orientation for Bangladesh students to learn English.

Hu (2001) investigated how socio-psychological variables and English language proficiency of EFL learners are related. Among the proposed socio-psychological variables of motivation, language shock, self-confidence, dominance, attitude, and indirect culture contact, motivation accounted for the greatest variance in determining the English language proficiency of EFL university students. Categorized as integrative motivation, learning interest accounted for 31% of the variance in predicting English language proficiency of Taiwanese university students (Hu, 2001). Krashen (2002) asserted that highly motivated learners with sufficient self-confidence, good self-image, and low level of anxiety are better equipped to succeed in second language acquisition than others.

b) Gardner's social-psychological model of L2 learning

The rationale behind Gardner's social-psychological model of L2 learning was the belief that the acquisition of an L2 was social-psychological rather than an educational phenomenon (Au, 1988). Gardner's model can be described by the following five propositions:

1. Integrative motive hypothesis—integrative motive positively contributes to L2 achievement.
2. Cultural belief hypothesis—local cultural beliefs can stimulate integrative motive, thus advancing L2 potential directly.
3. Active learner hypothesis—active, integratively motivated learners hold a distinct L2 learning advantage.
4. Causality hypothesis—a causality relationship exists between integrative motive and L2 achievement.
5. Two-process hypothesis—linguistic aptitude and integrative motive are independent, coexisting factors affecting L2 achievement.

c) Schumann's Acculturation Model

Schumann (1978) posited in the acculturation model that in terms of second language acquisition, social and affective factors were the underlying variables. That study further hypothesized that social factors and affective factors merged into a variable which he called acculturation. His term "acculturation" referred to the partial social and psychological merging and/or heterogeneous blending between the learner and target language (TL) group. That model assumed that the extent of linguistic integration varied with the degree of cultural acclimation.

Social variables have seven embedded elements: dominance pattern, integration strategies (assimilation/preservation/adaptation), enclosure, cohesiveness & size, congruence, attitude, and intended length of residence. Psychological variables consist of language shock, cultural shock, motivation, and ego-permeability

III. METHODOLOGY

a) Participants

The study participants were sampled from a technological institute in southern Taiwan. Totally, 486 students, 233 male and 253 female from ten classes participated in this study. Their majors varied from social studies, engineering, and business administration. All students had received the six-year standard formal English training in the Taiwanese education system.

Given the nature of this study, selective subject sampling was necessary. While preferred in terms of generalizability of findings, a random sample would have failed to produce the desired results in the focus of technological institute students' EFL proficiency.

b) Procedure

Written permission was received from the students' instructors before the survey was administered. Students were instructed to fill out their background information and express their opinions on a five-point Likert scale. The grammar test and listening comprehension test were undertaken shortly afterwards. All instructions were given in Chinese to ensure comprehension. The survey of the ten classes lasted up to four weeks.

c) Instrument

The instrument for measuring socio-psychological variables was a questionnaire. The questionnaire contained fifty-seven statements pertaining to the students' learning motivation, experience regarding language shock, self-confidence, dominance, attitude, and indirect culture contact. Of the six variables, motivation, language shock, dominance, and attitude were variables adopted from Schumann's acculturation model (1978); meanwhile self-confidence

and indirect culture contact were two variables adopted from our previous study. These six hypothetical variables were selected based on the adjusted needs of the target's foreign language context.

The instrument for measuring students' English language proficiency consisted of two 50-question multiple-choice English language proficiency tests: an English grammar test and a listening comprehension test. The grammar test contained grammar and reading comprehension-related questions, while the listening test contained short statements and dialogues. Both tests were taken from the pre-intermediate level General English Proficiency Test (GEPT). As one of the most accessible and reliable English language tests in Taiwan, GEPT is categorized into the following placement levels: pre-intermediate, intermediate, upper-intermediate, advanced, and top-tier. The pre-intermediate level test is appropriate for junior high students while the intermediate level test is intended for high school students. According to the Technological & Vocational Branch of the Ministry of Education in Taiwan, the previous years' passing rates of pre-intermediate level for English language proficiency of technological institute students hovered around 15.8%, 14.9%, and 18.1%, respectively (<http://erdos.csie.ncnu.edu.tw/~rctlee/article/930405.htm>). This observation indicates that the average technological institute student did not reach the threshold of pre-intermediate level, let alone the intermediate one. We can thus infer that the pre-intermediate level could best quantify the English language proficiency of the study participants.

Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient for the questionnaire was calculated to determine the internal-consistency reliability, which was computed as .92, indicating that the questionnaire used in this study is a reliable instrument. Pearson product-moment correlation analyses were also performed to explore the relationship between socio-psychological statements and students' English language proficiency.

d) Data analysis

Whether two or more variables are related was using Pearson's Product Moment Correlation tests. This approach is the conventional means of computing a correlation coefficient between variables that are linearly related (<http://www.le.ac.uk/bl/gat/virtualfc/Stats/pear.html>). The correlation coefficient r varies between +1.00 and -1.00. A higher absolute value of the correlation coefficient implies a stronger relationship between two variables (Maple, 1982). However, a correlational analysis can be viewed as assessing the contribution of an independent variable to a dependent variable; while it typically does not illuminate, in the optimal sense, the reality that most researchers want to study (Bailey, Onwuegbuzie, & Daley, 2000; Tatsuoka, 1973). Due to the situation where most phenomena

involve multiple effects, multiple regression was performed in this study as a major analysis approach.

Stepwise multiple regression is an important means of locating the most significant predictor (socio-psychological) variables within each criterion (English language proficiency) variable. Each variable is entered sequentially and its value is assessed. A variable is retained if it contributes to the model. However, all other variables in the model are then re-tested to determine if they still contribute to the model. Correspondingly, variables that no longer contribute significantly are removed. Thus, this method ensures that the model includes only the smallest possible set of predictor variables. While R denotes a measure of the correlation between the observed value and the predicted value of the criterion variable, R^2 (R Square) represents the square of the measure of correlation and indicates the proportion of the variance in the criterion variable which is accounted for by the proposed model. In this example, the proportion of the variance in English language proficiency was accounted for by our set of predictor variables (i.e. socio-psychological variables). In essence, knowing the predictor (i.e. socio-psychological) variables allows us to increase the prediction accuracy of our criterion (English language proficiency) variable. The beta value is a measure of how strongly each predictor variable influences the criterion variable. Thus, a higher beta value implies a greater impact of the predictor variable on the criterion variable. (<http://www.palgrave.com/pdfs/0333734718.pdf>)

IV. RESULTS

a) Correlational Analysis

According to Table 1, "motivation", "language shock", "self-confidence", "attitude", and "indirect culture contact" had a considerable amount of items correlating with two criterion measures at the .01 level of significance. Among the correlated items, the items from self-confidence "I can sufficiently read English." (SELF22), "I am proficient in English composition." (SELF24), and "I can learn a foreign language." (SELF18) ranked the highest (.41**), the second highest (.40**), and the fourth highest (.38**) correlation coefficients with one of the criterion measures at .01 level of significance, respectively. Clearly, for the survey subjects, self-confidence is a major criterion in determining their mastery of English. Under Motivation, "I am interested in learning English." (MOT17) scored the third highest (.39**) correlation coefficient with one of the criterion measures. Interest in learning a foreign language (integrative-oriented motivation) also demonstrated its significance in determining individual mastery of English proficiency.

Table 1 : Correlations of Socio-psychological Variables and English Language Proficiency Variables

Socio-psychological Variables	English Language Proficiency Variables	
	Grammar Test	Listening Test
Motivation		
I want to be a U. S. immigrant (MOT11)	---	---
I want to get a better job (MOT12)	---	---
English is useful when travelling abroad (MOT13)	.13**	.10*
I want to be able to communicate with foreigners in English (MOT14)	.25**	.22**
I want to study in English-based countries (MOT15)	.27**	.25**
I can obtain greater social appreciation (MOT16)	---	---
I am interested in learning English (MOT17)	.39**	.31**
English is required for my schoolwork (MOT18)		
English is a required course (MOT19)	---	---
I am interested in English-based cultures (MOT110)	.32**	.24**
Other reasons: _____(MOT111)		
Language Shock		
I can communicate clearly when using English (LANG12)	.26**	.15**
I can do impromptu conversation drills in class (LANG13)	.30**	.20**
I can emulate the teacher's pronunciation in class without feeling anxiety (LANG14)	.25**	.19**
I have no difficulty when speaking in English (LANG15)	.32**	.20**
I don't feel nervous when I don't understand what the addresser says to me in English (LANG16)	.18**	---
When the addressee doesn't understand what I have said, I have the courage to say it again (LANG17)	.23**	.17**
Self-confidence		
I feel that I am talented in learning foreign languages (SELF18)	.38**	.30**
I am talented in acquiring up a foreign language pronunciation (SELF19)	.31**	.23**
I am quick to pick up pronunciation techniques (SELF20)	.29**	.23**
I can quickly learn new vocabulary (SELF21)	.33**	.24**
I can sufficiently read English (SELF22)	.41**	.30**
I can listen to English language radio shows without difficulty (SELF23)	.37**	.32**
I am capable of English composition (SELF24)	.40**	.31**
Dominance		
U. S. government policies can influence that of Taiwan's (DOMI25)	---	.10*
The U. S. economy influences Taiwan's economy (DOMI26)	---	---

U. S. technology is superior to that of Taiwan's (DOMI27)	---	---
U.S. mass media influence excessively extends into Taiwan (DOMI28)	.09*	---
U.S. culture has significantly influenced Taiwanese culture (MOTI29)	---	---
U.S. culture has positive, beneficial impact on Taiwan (DOMI30)	---	---
Attitude		
I can appreciate Americans for their refined sense of humor (ATTI31)	.10*	.10*
I can appreciate Americans for their respect of an individual's privacy (ATTI32)	.12**	.10*
I can appreciate Americans' openness towards sexuality(ATTI33)	.10*	---
I can appreciate the way American parents educate their children (ATTI34)	.10*	---
I can appreciate Americans' heuristic educational methods (ATTI35)	.11*	---
I can appreciate the American spirit of liberty (ATTI36)	---	----
I can appreciate the American tradition of democracy (ATTI37)	---	---
I can tolerate the cultural gaps between U.S. and Taiwan (ATTI38)	---	---
I can accept a foreigner as my neighbor (ATTI39)	.10*	.11*
I can accept American style cuisine (ATTI40)	.09*	---
I prefer to use English textbooks instead of their translated counterparts (ATTI41)	.25**	.20**
Learning a foreign language changes a person's cultural perceptions (ATTI42)	.17**	.12**
A person who speaks English well perceives his own country differently than one who does not (ATTI43)	---	---
Foreigners who actively criticize my country are personally biased (ATTI44)	---	---
I do not favor cross-cultural matrimony (ATTI45)	.17**	.12**
Over all, I prefer the U.S. culture over my own (ATTI46)	.17**	---
Indirect Culture Contact		
The frequency of which I listen to English radio programs is: (INDI47)	.28**	.26**
The frequency of which I watch English movies is: (INDI48)	.15**	.16**
The frequency of which I read English magazines is: (INDI49)	.32**	.26**
When possible, I proactively befriend foreigners (INDI50)	.17**	.16**
I love to listen to English songs (INDI51)	.18**	.18**
When I listen to English songs I try to learn the lyrics (INDI52)	.26**	.20**
I proactively go to intensive English programs to strengthen my English skills (INDI53)	.16**	---
When choosing English programs, foreign	.21**	.14**

teachers are a critical criterion I seek (INDI54)		
Whenever I see a foreigner, I always take the initiative to talk to him/her (INDI55)	.20**	.15**
On my own initiative, I buy English books or CDs to improve my English proficiency (INDI56)	.26**	.20**
I use English TV programs to sharpen my listening comprehension (INDI57)	.39**	.30**

**p<0.01, *p<0.05

b) Stepwise multiple regression analysis

In this study, although 57 items were designed to predict two criterion measures, the stepwise multiple regression program was run only with predictor items correlating at the .01 level of significance. Totally, 33 items correlated at the .01 level of significance with at least one criterion variable. The items were then put into the respective stepwise multiple regression equations of the grammar test and listening test.

According to Table 2, six entered items accounted for a total of 31.1 % (R² at the last step) of variance in the grammar test equation, suggesting a strong predictive power. The first and second entered items were both from the predictor variable of self-confidence, which accounted for 25 % of the variance, demonstrating its significant contribution in predicting English language proficiency.

The remaining items entered were from the variables of motivation and indirect culture contact. According to the non-multicollinearity characteristics of predictor items when applied to stepwise multiple regressions, the entered items showed very distinctive traits from each other. The six entered items were as follows: "I can sufficiently read English." (SELF22), "I am proficient in English composition." (SELF24), "I am interested in learning English." (MOT17), "I actively participate in intensive English programs to strengthen my English skills." (INDI53), "I want to study in English-speaking countries." (MOTI5) and "I frequently read English language magazines." (INDI49).

Table 2: Stepwise multiple regression model for predicting grammar test^a

Step	Predictor	F-to-enter	P	Multiple R	R ²
1	SELF22	100.37	.000	.433	.188
2	SELF24	72.74	.000	.501	.251
3	MOT17	57.75	.000	.535	.286
4	INDI53	44.99	.002	.543	.295
5	MOTI5	37.41	.025	.551	.303
6	INDI49	32.24	.030	.557	.311

^aModel

According to Table 3, three entered items accounted for 16.5 % of variance in the listening test equation, indicating a medium effect size. The entered items came from two predictor variables: self-confidence and motivation. Two variables from self-confidence were entered at the first and third step, respectively. Again, self-confidence emerged as the

most significant predictor variable in the listening test equation.

Table 3: Stepwise multiple regression model for predicting listening test^b

Step	Predictor	F-to-enter	P	Multiple R	R ²
1	SELF23	60.244	.002	.347	.120
2	MOTI7	38.518	.001	.386	.149
3	SELF24	28.985	.004	.407	.165

^bModel

c) Ranking of hypothetical variables

Based on the number of predictor items entered into the sum total of the two regression equations, as well as the change in R² when entered, the component variables were listed in a descending order of importance:

1. *Self-confidence*: three items entered into two equations (total change in R² = .39)
2. *Motivation*: two items entered into two equations (total change in R² = .08)
3. *Indirect culture contact*: three items entered into two equations (total change in R² = .02)

V. DISCUSSION

a) Self-confidence

Stepwise multiple regression analysis lends support to the strong predictive power of self-confidence (total change in R² = .39) with a total of three self-confidence items entered into both of the equations.

Self-confidence seems to be what Taiwanese technological institute students lacks the most, due to their own perception of academic inferiority (Hu, 2007, 2011). Clement, et al. (1994) assessed the role of linguistic self-confidence, suggesting that anxiety and self-perception of L2 competence can be determinants of L2 achievement, even in contexts lacking in opportunity to use L2. That study further indicated that anxiety and self-confidence in the L2 classroom were intimately linked to educational processes. While investigating EFL proficiency of Taiwanese university students in relation to their socio-psychological factors, Hu (2001) indicated that motivation explained the most variance in predicting the English language proficiency of EFL university students. Comparing the findings of Hu (2001) and those of this study reveal that self-

confidence, not motivation, of technological institute students is the major deciding factor for the successful mastery of foreign language proficiency. For EFL university students, motivation, especially their interest in learning English, played a significant role in predicting their attainment of English language proficiency. However, for technological institute students, self-confidence preceded motivation and accounted for the greatest variance in the prediction of their English language proficiency. This result corroborates with the observation that the low self-confidence of Taiwanese technological institute students in academic achievements had evidently impeded their English language acquisition skills. Above results clearly demonstrate that low self-confidence, language anxiety, and demotivation in a foreign language environment were bounded phenomena.

b) *Motivation*

MOT17 ("I am interested in learning English.") ranked as the highest correlation coefficient among motivational items; it entered both criterion equations at significant levels. Dornyei (1990b) noted that intended contact with target language speakers was significantly related to affectively based motivation. Instrumental items (such as MOT13—"English is useful when travelling.", and MOT15—"I want to study in English-speaking countries.") were also found to correlate with EFL measures. However, neither of the items were sufficiently influential to be entered into the equations. Dornyei (1990b) suggested that instrumental goals played a prominent role in acquiring English skills up to an intermediate level. However, Clement et al. (1994) asserted that learners whose interest in learning English included sociocultural and nonprofessional considerations demonstrated the highest degree of desired proficiency. That is, those students wished to master the English language rather than acquire only a minimalistic, functional grasp of it. According to Clement et al. (1994), even in a context where foreign language learning was largely an academic matter, student motivation remained socially-grounded. We can thus infer that regardless of the motivation, learning without interest ultimately leads to null and void achievements.

c) *Indirect culture contact*

Taiwanese foreign language students learn English primarily throughout their school years. However, the average student is often not considered proficient in English, even after the completion of the formal, six-year English language training. The obtained findings showed that not only did all of the survey's indirect culture contact items significantly correlate with EFL measures, two indirect cultural contact items were also found to enter one stepwise multiple regression equation.

This phenomenon has important implications for EFL practitioners in that students should be encouraged to actively participate in related English activities. Related research has indicated that some learners are more successful than others because they approach learning tasks with more efficient methods (Chamot, 1987; Oxford, 1992; Rubin, 1975). Huang and Tzeng (2000) examined how competent English achievers effectively utilize available learning strategies. They found that nearly all participants adopted active attitudes in seeking input and output opportunities to practice their English. In addition to passively receiving reading and listening materials and instructions provided by their institutions, the study participants also actively searched for additional sources of English input. The respondents were also found to effectively utilize their time by listening to English radio programs, speaking English with friends or during class, reading English language materials, and leaving messages in English. Huang and Tzeng (2000) claimed that in environments, such as Taiwan, where English was a foreign language, a sufficient supply of English input and practice opportunities were necessary to fully immerse the students in a meaningful foreign language experience. Additionally, learners needed to become self-motivated to the extent that they could independently seek out English input and practice opportunities to increase their English exposure.

VI. CONCLUSIONS

This study thoroughly elucidates the socio-psychological variables for EFL learning among technological institute students in Taiwan. Stepwise multiple regression analysis indicates that self-confidence is the most significant predictor variable of English language proficiency. We believe that the lack of self-confidence stems from the students' history of lower academic performance than that of the average university student. While self-confidence was perceived as an affective state, external supplementation through positive reinforcement, as well as socially interactive encouragement may significantly boost students' self-confidence. These technological institute students were generally considered to be less academically successful than university students, resulting in a foreign language acquisition impediment. For technological institute students, therefore, building self-confidence with a foreign language not only involves the learners' psychological state, but also additional effort on the language practitioners' behalf. Horwitz and Young (1991) suggested that increasing students' knowledge of the language-learning process increased their acquisition and self-confidence capabilities. Clement et al. (1994) noted that building self-confidence in second language usage would lower learner anxiety and increase self-perceptions.

Motivation, the second most significant predictor in this study, was also the most significant predictor variable in Hu (2001). Comparing those results demonstrated the significance and viability of academic background based precursors towards English language proficiency of Taiwanese EFL learners. Additionally, senior high school students appeared to be more confident of their academic achievement than their vocational high school counterparts. Although not located as the most significant predictor, motivation was still a significant predictor variable for technological institute students. Therefore, motivating students, integratively or instrumentally, was vital when helping them build self-confidence. When equally motivated, a major separator between technological institute students and university students was the confidence stemming from their knowledge base: university students excelled in their existing, broader academic foundation. Academically underdeveloped, technological institute students were faced with the additional difficulty of reconstructing a healthy self-confidence. Moreover, comparing motivation and self-confidence revealed that the latter was a generally more difficult barrier: motivation could be externally influenced, while constructing self-confidence required a systematic combination of various factors, including psychological, intellectual, and tactile learning experiences.

The third significant predictor variable – i.e. indirect culture contact – was also noteworthy. Taiwanese language teachers should encourage students to indulge themselves in popular, yet effective English learning strategies, including watching English movies and TV programs (without Chinese language subtitles), as well as learning English songs to further aid them in their learning process. When integrated into the student's learning experience, all of the previous conditions can allow students to become proficient in English as a foreign language.

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