English Learning Motivation and Anxiety Regarding the Left-Behind Children in Rural China

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ABSTRACT: This study addressed the affective factors in English learning of the Left-behind children (LBCs) in the seventh grade in rural China. Results indicated the difference between the non-LBCs and the LBCs in language achievement and motivation with statistical significance. Follow-up interviews revealed a lack of parental engagement, lower level of technological literacy, and test-taking and questions-answering anxiety contributed to the LBCs' academic underperformance and lower motivation in English learning. Pedagogical implications are discussed regarding how to foster English learning motivation and enhance learner autonomy for LBCs and build communication among different stakeholders in education.
Key words: Motivation, Anxiety, Left-behind Children, English Learning, Rural China.

Motivación y ansiedad por aprender inglés con respecto a los niños abandonados en la China rural.

RESUMEN: Este estudio abordó los factores afectivos en el aprendizaje del inglés de los niños abandonados, Left-Behind Children (LBC's) en el séptimo grado en la China rural. Los resultados indicaron diferencias significativas entre los LBCs y los no LBCs en el lenguaje y motivación. Las entrevistas conducidas revelaron una falta de participación de los padres y un nivel más bajo de alfabetización tecnológica. La ansiedad de tomar exámenes y responder a preguntas también contribuyeron al bajo rendimiento académico de los LBCs y a una baja motivación en el aprendizaje del inglés. En este estudio, se discuten las implicaciones pedagógicas sobre cómo fomentar la motivación del aprendizaje del inglés, como mejorar la autonomía del los LBC alumnos y fomentar la comunicación entre los interesados en mejorar la educación.
Palabras clave: Motivación, ansiedad, niños abandonados, aprendizaje del inglés, China rural.

1. Introduction

Following China's rapid development and urbanisation, an increasing number of migrant workers have flooded into the cities to make a living. However, hurdles such as high tuition fees, underprivileged education opportunities and the restrictions set by China's Household Registration (*Hukou*) System make it difficult for migrant workers' children to enter public schools in the cities where their parents work (Liang & Chen, 2007; Wang et al., 2017), thus resulting in the separation of parents and children and the emergence of a new social

group: the 'Left-behind' children (hereinafter abbreviated as LBCs). In China, the term LBC refers to children under the age of 18 who are cared for by one parent, their grandparents or other caregivers while one or both of their parents has emigrated for work for at least six months (Wen & Lin, 2012). The latest statistics show that the size of this group has ballooned to about 69.7 million (Zhou, 2019). Literature on migration in China seems to have reached a consensus that migration has benefited the economic development of both the places of destination and origin. However, what remains less clear is how LBCs fare in this large-scale social transformation in an academic sense, especially in terms of English learning, given t he complexities of the communities and the diverse family backgrounds of Chinese rural areas. Research has shown that the children left behind encounter a lot more difficulties in concentrating on their study and in achieving progress compared to other children, owing to a myriad of factors including the undeniable effect of affective variables (such as 'emotional illiteracy'), which are caused by the absence of their parents (Ye & Murray, 2005; Lu & Lu, 2006). Compared with their peers, LBCs suffered far more problems in their growth and studying relative to their peers. Indeed, the emotional and academic problems of LBCs in China have become a research focus over the past decade, while conflicting results have failed to provide definitive conclusions for policy-making and educational practice. This is due to the complexities of communities and the diversity of family backgrounds in Chinese rural areas (Bai et al., 2018; Fan & Guo, 2015; Zhou et al., 2005). Wang and Mao's (2018) study indicated that boarding on campus had a negative effect on LBCs' sense of belonging at school, as well as their academic achievement (measured by the sum score of Chinese and Mathematics). Parental migration also has a significant negative impact on the school performance of LBCs, in many subjects, such as maths and English (Zhao et al., 2014; Xia, 2015; Li, Chen, & Jiang, 2017). On the other hand, Zhou et al. (2015) found that LBCs performed as well as, or even better than, children living with both parents on nine health and educational outcomes, while Bai et al. (2018) found that parental migration has significant and positive impacts on the academic performance of LBCs (measured by standardised English test scores) of rural primary school students in ethnic minority areas of rural China. In Xia's study (2015), motivation for and attitudes towards learning are affected directly by the absence of parental involvement in students' academic achievement, English learning included. MacWhinnie's research (2017), meanwhile, has suggested the importance of family as a substantial predictor of motivation and anxiety, and as being indicative of English learning results.

However, there is little information available in the existing literature regarding the affective variables' role in LBCs' English learning. To fill this gap, we conducted the present study making comparisons between LBCs and non-LBCs (those living together with their parents) by focusing on the relationships among motivation, anxiety and academic achievement in English learning in rural China. As a large spectrum of research conducted on affective variables in language learning in Chinese context has focused on tertiary students' language learning, it is important to extend these research efforts to address LBCs' English learning considering the tremendous number of learners in question.

2. Theoretical framework and literature review

The term 'affect' is generally associated with one's emotional being in juxtaposition with the rational being. As we narrow down the concept of affect to the context of foreign

language learning, the following definition is considered exhaustive in that it encompasses both facilitating and debilitating affect in a social milieu, as well as in a tutored setting:

Affectivity is the totality of all components of foreign language instruction that influence the emotional attitude toward learning a foreign language and toward using it, as well as the foreign language atmosphere in general and the success of the learning and teaching process in particular. Not only those components that promote intensive and language-activating emotions but also those that inhibit or evoke negative emotions, should be given special consideration (Apelt & Koering, 1997: 37).

Ellis (1999: 483) remarked that "learners' affective states are obviously of crucial importance in accounting for individual differences in learning outcomes". It should be noted that the various emotions affecting language learning are inextricably interwoven and intertwined in such ways as make it impossible to completely isolate the influence of any one of them individually. As Gardner and MacIntyre remarked (1993: 190), "In terms of predicting achievement in the second language, inclusion of more than one class of affective variable appears to improve prediction". In the present study, attention will be directed to some of these factors, which are of particular importance for second language acquisition because "Factors or combinations of factors having to do with attitudes, motivation, and level of anxiety are central to the affective domain" (Yagi, 1991:19).

Dörnyei (1998: 177) stated that "motivation has been widely accepted by both teachers and researchers as one of the key factors that influences the rate and success of second/foreign language (L2) learning". According to Masgoret and Gardner (2003: 174), "motivation is seen to be the major affective individual-difference variable contributing to achievement in learning another language", and the "motivated individual" is characterized as follows (2003: 173):

The motivated individual expends effort, is persistent and attentive to the task at hand, has goals, desires, and aspirations, enjoys the activity, experiences reinforcement from success and disappointment from failure, makes attributions concerning success and/or failure, is aroused, and makes use of strategies to aid in achieving goals.

Language anxiety refers to "apprehension experienced by the individual in the language class or any situation in which the language is used", and "is the best single (negative) correlate of achievement" (Gardner & MacIntyr, 1993). A negative relationship between anxiety and learning achievements has been revealed in many studies involving all four language skills (Yang, 2010). However, as Scovel (2004) has noted, "anxiety can be a significant player in the game of language acquisition, but its effects are neither simple nor solely negative". Consequently, "to view anxiety as an enemy of language acquisition is unreasonable, inaccurate, and indefensible". In a similar manner, Young (1991) has remarked that "language anxiety is a complex, multidimensional phenomenon. It manifests itself in students quite differently depending on ethnic background, prior language experience, learner personality, and classroom circumstances".

3. Research aims

Our overriding objective was to understand more about this precise population, based on our deeper knowledge of the socio-economic and educational backgrounds of this region. Therefore, the current research employed a mixed-methods approach by delivering

questionnaires to students and conducting interviews with twelve language teachers in order to collect data. This was done with the intention of gaining a deeper understanding of the role of motivation and anxiety in LBCs' English achievement, as well as attributable factors among the variables under investigation, in the hope of offering pedagogical implications for different stakeholders, including language teachers, parents and policy-makers.

RQ1. How do the LBCs differ from non-LBCs regarding English achievement, anxiety and motivation in English learning?

RQ2. To what extent do motivation and anxiety predict English Learning?

RQ3. How do language teachers perceive LBCs' English learning in the follow-up interview?

4. Methodology

4.1. Quantitative study

4.1.1. Setting

The research site is a state-run middle school in Anhui province, China. It is situated in a southern rural county called Jing County. The school was chosen because it is one of the two secondary schools authorised to recruit LBCs from various neighbouring towns or rural villages, and students study there from the 7th to the 9th grade for three academic years. There were 4,523 LBCs in 2016, accounting for around 20% of all the children in the county, and the number is still increasing year by year.

Students from different family backgrounds are randomly placed into one classroom. The English class in this school is taught three times a week (18 weeks during a semester) by Chinese teachers in a class of 65-70 students. Students learn English with very little or no contact with people from English-speaking countries. More information about the general learning conditions in rural China was reported by language teachers in the interview. The results are displayed in Table 1.

Table 1. English Learning conditions in Rural China.

Language use	In class	Chinese 71%, English 29%
	Outside class	Chinese 98%, Dialect 2%
English input	In class	Course book, Teacher talk, Multimedia resources, etc.
	Outside class	Picture books reading, audio-video (digital) resources, etc.
English output	In class	Little oral communication (only T initiate, S answer), dialogue, read aloud, Written work <60 words per week
	Outside class	Story-telling, memorisation of words or texts, etc.
Lesson length	40-45mins per session; 2-6 sessions per week	

4.1.2. Participants

The participants in the present study were sixty-nine seventh grade students from one class. Specifically, there were 39 non-LBCs (22 male and 17 female) and 30 LBCs (17 male and 13 female), while the mean age was 14.56. The English class was taught by a Chinese female teacher with 20 years of teaching experience. All of the participants were Mandarin Chinese speakers. Students were told to answer the questions as honestly as possible. Participation in the study was voluntary and the data were only used for research purposes and kept confidential. Consent was obtained from all of the students.

4.1.3. Instruments

Learners' bio data: The students provided information relating to their gender, name, age, their prior knowledge of English and their family background. The items were adapted from Ye & Murray (2005), and consisted of items including the time the parent(s) spent together with the LBCs and the ways the parents educate their children.

Motivation: The 11 items addressing motivation fall into two categories: *Learning purposes* and *Efforts*. The items were adapted from motivation scales developed by Wen (1993) and Li et al. (2006). However, as opposed to the nature of their studies centring on Chinese college students' English learning, this study focused on students' English learning in Chinese middle school. Considering English learning in this context differed markedly from that in colleges in terms of students' learning purposes and learning conditions. The items "I need English for my future career" and "I need English for studying abroad", designed by Wen (1993), were omitted.

Anxiety: The English Learning Anxiety Inventory for Chinese Middle School Students, developed by Liu (1989) and based on the work of Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986), focused more directly on the connection between anxiety and proficiency in a foreign language for middle school students in the Chinese context. Considering the fact that English does not play a part in students' lives outside school, as well as the fact that there is not much exposure to English for the students under investigation, the items in anxiety scale were constructed centring around two conceptual aspects: learners' fear of negative evaluation and their lack of self-confidence.

In order to facilitate students' understanding, all of the items were stated in Chinese using a 5-point scale, with the exception of the items in the first section. 12 items were found to be statistically insignificant after the internal consistency test, and were thus excluded in the data analysis. Exploratory factor analysis revealed a construct-related validity of both motivation (KMO=0.884 with factors showing high loadings between .544 and .799 (>.30)) and anxiety (KMO=0.869, varying between .531 and .802 (>.30)). Cronbach alpha reliability coefficients for the motivation instrument reached 0.860, while the anxiety instrument reached 0.893.

English achievement: The final English examination authorised by the local Education Bureau was used as a reference to index students' language achievement, which includes listening, speaking, writing and integrated skills. The achievement scores were obtained from the course instructor at the end of the semester.

4.1.4. Data Collection and Analysis

Questionnaires were administered to the selected class in June 2017 and were filled in during normal class time. Two researchers and a school coordinator were present to oversee the procedure and provide detailed instructions. Answering the questions took the students approximately 20 minutes and the response rate was 100%. After all the data were sorted and filed onto the computer system, the SPSS15.0 program was run in order to analyse the data.

The data from the whole sample of participants were first submitted to an independent sample *t*-test in order to determine whether the LBCs differed from the non-LBCs in terms of motivation, anxiety and English achievement. The data were then submitted to a Pearson correlation analysis to determine the degree of interrelatedness of the three variables. Furthermore, a stepwise multiple regression analysis was used in order to examine the relations between motivation, anxiety and English learning, with motivation and anxiety used as predictor factors and English achievement as a dependent (predicted) variable.

4.1.5. Results

RQ1. How do LBCs differ from non-LBCs among English achievement, anxiety and motivation in English learning?

The majority of respondents reported that they could learn the 26 English letters by heart and only knew very few English words. It is assumed that there was no significant difference between LBCs and non-LBCs in English learning before the systemic teaching process in the seventh grade. However, of concern for us is whether there is any difference in English achievement between them after one year of systematic study. An independent sample *t*-test (See Table 2) showed that the difference in language achievement and motivation between the two groups was significant (t=-2.183 and t=-2.418 respectively, p<0.05). However, the difference between the two groups in language anxiety is too negligible to be statistically significant (t=1.093, p=0.278), and thus the marginal differences between the mean scores can only be interpreted as chance fluctuations.

Table 2. Independent t-tests for motivation, anxiety and English achievement.

Variables		N	Mean	SD	SE	*t*-value	Sig.
English Achievement	LBCs	30	57.80	16.982	3.100	-2.183	.033
	Non-LBCs	39	66.64	16.436	2.632		
Motivation	LBCs	30	2.1697	.87904	.16049	-2.418	.018
	Non-LBCs	39	2.6387	.73159	.11715		
Anxiety	LBCs	30	2.3282	.87565	.15987	1.093	.278
	Non-LBCs	39	2.0927	.89623	.14351		

RQ2. To what extent do motivation and anxiety predict English Learning?

The focus of analysis then shifted towards identifying the interrelationships among motivation, anxiety and English learning. The data (see Table 3) show negative moderate correlations between language anxiety and motivation (r=-0.453, p<0.01) and language anxiety and language achievement (r=-.570, p<0.01), but positive correlations between motivation and language achievement (r=0.736, p<0.01).

Table 3. Correlations among motivation, anxiety and language achievement (n=69).

Variables	Motivation	Anxiety	English Achievement
Motivation	1	-.453**	.736**
Anxiety	-.453**	1	-.570**
English Achievement	.736**	-.570**	1
Mean	2.4348	2.1951	62.80
SD	.82673	.88865	17.130

**p<.01.

We then performed a regression analysis in order to identify the presumed predictive validity of motivation and anxiety, with English achievement as the dependent variable. From Table 4, motivation and anxiety in combination can explain 60% variance of language achievement (p=0.000), indicating that the two variables explained the variance of the dependent variables to a significant effect. The t values for motivation and anxiety were 6.99 and -3.459 respectively (p=0.000). It can be seen that motivation and anxiety did have an influence on learners' English achievement.

Table 4. Beta-weights of motivation, and anxiety as predictors of English achievement.

Variable	B	Beta	t	Significance
Motivation	12.461	0.601	6.995	0.000
Anxiety	-5.733	-0.297	-3.459	0.001
(Constant)	45.040		6.499	0.000

Note. R^2= 0.6, F=52.07, p<0.01.

4.1.6. Discussion

We can recognise the superior language achievement of the non-LBCs in the study, as well as the fact that motivation and language anxiety both have a significant bearing on academic achievement (Table 3). Contrary to our expectation, the difference in anxiety between the two groups is not found to be statistically significant, perhaps due to the se-

lection of small samples. However, the interviews with teachers offered some informative cues regarding anxiety in the LBCs' English learning.

A positive correlation between motivation and language achievement did emerge, replicating the results obtained in previous studies (Li et al., 2006; Gardner & MacIntyre, 1991; Yagi 1991; Dornyei, 2000). The negative moderate correlation between anxiety and language achievement is also consistent with the findings of previous research (Young, 1991; Aida, 1994; Bailey, Onwuegbuzie, & Daley, 2000; Horwitz, 2001; Abu-Rabia, 2004). The results suggest that motivation and anxiety have significant effects on English achievement and can predict language achievement to a great extent. The more motivated the learners are, the lower their level of language anxiety will be and the higher level of language achievement the learners will attain. The follow-up interview with the language teachers helped to unveil the contributing factors regarding the LBCs' academic underperformance.

4.2. Qualitative Study

We further addressed the third research question, concerning the LBCs' language learning, through semi-structured interviews with English teachers. The teacher participants accounted how they observed the LBCs' learning process.

4.2.1. Participants

We interviewed twelve English teachers (8 female, 4 male) working full time in public elementary and secondary schools in rural East China, where a large population of migrant workers come from. All of the interviewees were certified teachers (mean of teaching experience is 12.8 years, mean age is 35.7). Participants were given a pseudonym consisting of numbers and letters that assisted in maintaining a reference point regarding their responses.

4.2.2. Data collection procedures

Among the 12 participants, nine were recruited through the researchers' personal contacts and three from referrals of contacts. The 12 interviews were conducted in our participants' L1 (Mandarin Chinese) for 30-45 minutes respectively. Audio was recorded with the participants' consent. A semi-structured interview protocol was used in order to elicit the participants' responses to the LBCs' English learning. The transcribed scripts were later translated by the researchers into English. After the two researchers became familiar with the data, they started to attach codes to the data that described participants' observations of the LBCs' English learning. The researchers then grouped them into categories by analysing the data and sought to identify the core features regarding their responses to these questions:

(1) Is there any academic performance gap between LBCs and non-LBCs in his/her class? If yes, what accounts for the gap?

(2) How about the LBCs' motivation for learning compared with non-LBCs? Is there any observable anxiety regarding LBCs in class?

(3) Does parents' out-migration affect the LBCs in terms of their academic performance or personal and social well-being?

4.2.3. Results and Discussion

The analysis of the interview data revealed four categories, which are discussed below with reference to the relevant existing literature:

Firstly, all participating teachers reported an academic performance gap between the LBCs and non-LBCs, except for P3, who said "*All students in my class are not performing well in English, and there's not much difference between the LBCs and the non-LBCs*". P7 and P8 reported explicitly poor academic performance among the LBCs.

In my class, LBCs are very poor in English learning. Compared with the non-LBCs, the LBCs lagged way behind the non-LBCs. (P7, P8)

The overall performance of my class is not good, but the LBCs performed even worse. (P1, P5)

The LBCs are very poor in English, and their learning interest is not strong. (P2, P6).

The LBCs in my class do not have good learning habits, and they lack autonomy and self-discipline in learning. (P9)

The above excerpts resonated with the current study's questionnaire-based findings that the non-LBCs have superiority over LBCs in English achievement.

Secondly, a lack of parental engagement was also reported in the interviews. When asked if the parents' out-migration affects the LBC's growth in terms of English learning, most participating teachers favoured this assumption, which is consistent with the previous research findings (Zhao, et al. 2014; Xia, 2015; Li et al., 2017) and contradicts the findings yielded by Zhou et al. (2015) and Bai et al. (2018). Specific reasons are provided as follows:

> …they lack the initiative to read picture books after class, and the topic for discussion is not as broad as their peers. (P10)
> …there're mainly three aspects: students' learning attitude; English handwriting and the quality of the assignment submitted; knowledge consolidation, elevation and extension. (P6)
> …lots of pre/after-class listening, reading and imitating assignments assisted by digital devices are hard for them to complete. Some problems, if not addressed well or promptly, would lead to more serious problems. It's like "chronic illness" and will directly affect their growth and academic achievement in the long term. (P7)

None of the participants reported the direct impact of parents' out-migration on the LBCs in terms of personal and social well-being, but some noticed their lack of self-discipline and confidence.

> … for the left-behind children in my class, they are either too timid or too naughty. They tend to go to extremes. (P8)

The extended activities assigned by the teachers can complement the constraints of inadequate input in class and the lack of authentic resources, especially in rural areas. This was evidenced by the participant teachers' report that "about 98% of the language used outside class is Chinese". However, the value of the extended pre/after-class activities has not been fully realized by most LBCs, as demonstrated by the above excerpts. A lack of adequate parental involvement is detrimental to students' active learning and academic achievement.

When students have problems in English learning, they don't have much resource to turn to in the Chinese context. Caregivers are almost ignorant of English, unlike maths and Chinese. So gradually, the time spent in English learning is less than in other subjects and their interest in English may decrease. This (feeling demotivated in English) is like a virus, affecting other subjects. They regard it as a burden and gradually form negative attitudes towards this subject. (P2)

P2 described the LBCs' lack of support for English learning after class, partly because of their caregivers' lower literacy levels. Their dislike of English learning was also reported by Liao (2018), who cited the relative difficulty perceived by the learners. The LBCs do not lack intelligence and capacity, but lack the necessary support from their families.

It is comforting and commendable that there exist LBCs-friendly services available in every participant's school, such as after-school programs and paired teacher-student partnership. School policies and teachers' practice clearly prove that due attention has been paid to LBCs. For example, the school holds regular meetings for the LBCs' caregivers to attend. However, when confronted with large class sizes and tight schedules, teachers also expressed their frustration at not being able to address individual needs (P2).

Teachers are unable to address their individual psychological problems, because there're over half of them in my class. Parents don't communicate very often with us, so some of them become literally left-behind in the class. (P2)

Some teachers are cognisant of the LBCs learners' needs, as P6 remarked:

They hope to get attention from teachers, so love, support and encouragement are what teachers can do.

Some teachers' love towards their students transcends the four walls of the class, as P4 described:

I do my utmost to afford more care and help to these children. I buy some audio English learning resources for them and encourage them to practice English speaking.

Love and care is the fundamental tenet in the education of the LBCs. To make them feel they are supported and valued by the teacher is the essential drive of fostering motivation in an academic sense.

Thirdly, a lower level of technological literacy was reported in the interviews with language teachers. Technological devices are of vital importance to students' English learning in the Chinese context. Most participants reported the use of technological devices in class and encouraged students to use e-learning platforms outside the classroom. However, the ineffectiveness of using these resources was remarked by several participants (P1, P6, P7, P10):

> I often assign some homework, like, listening, reading, dubbing, uploading their audio work to Xiao Heiban App (an interactive platform for teachers to assign homework and make announcements, and for students to submit their work). It needs parents' assistance to do this task well. The grandparents don't know how to use Apps of this kind and can be of little help to do this, so students' interest in learning decreases gradually. (P6)
>
> …lots of pre/after-class tasks…assisted by digital devices are hard for them to complete, so learners cannot keep tune with teachers' syllabus. (P7)

Students are encouraged to use English learning Apps in order to facilitate their learning effectiveness. These digital resources can give students ample opportunities and afford them

authentic learning materials to use language. Taking it as an important source of language input, teachers assign the students to use the digital resources outside the classroom. However, these learners are not mature enough to fulfil these tasks on their own and lack the self-discipline required to use these devices for learning. The caregivers, mostly grandparents, do not have much technological literacy and are of little help in monitoring them at home.

Fourthly, the left-behind children showed a high level of anxiety when taking tests and answering questions in class. Most parents care too much about students' test scores, while simultaneously neglecting the importance of nurturing their interest in English learning.

> Some show anxiety and fear because their assigned tasks are not fulfilled. When parents come back during spring festival or when children go to visit their parents during summer vacation, what they ask most often is their children's test scores. Some show higher anxiety when taking exams for fear of disappointing their parents. (P6)
> To some parents, the ultimate purpose of learning a foreign language is obtaining a high score instead of communicating or knowing another culture. (P1)
> When asked to answer questions in class, they show fear and anxiety. (P11)

When learners are not confident about English proficiency, they lack confidence in participating in class activities or answering questions. P6 explicated how students' fear and anxiety in test taking bears relation to their parents' overemphasis on academic scores. High academic performance is usually defined as success in most people's eyes under the current exam-oriented educational system. Instead of focusing too much on the scores, parents need to shift their attention to the children's inner needs and the difficulties they encounter in order to help nurture children's autonomy, interest and motivation in foreign language learning.

5. Conclusions

By employing both quantitative and qualitative methods, our study contributes to the existing research regarding motivation, anxiety and their role in LBCs' English learning in rural China.

The first question of interest was the difference between the LBCs and non-LBCs in English achievement, motivation and anxiety in English learning. We found there were detectable differences in English achievement and motivation levels with statistical significance. Reports from interviews with 12 language teachers echoed this finding. Eleven teachers voiced that an academic gap existed between the two groups. LBCs' lack of self-discipline and lower level of learner autonomy was also observed by most teachers. Furthermore, some teachers reported that LBCs had a higher level of anxiety when taking tests due to their parents' overemphasis on academic scores. When language teachers assigned homework enabled by digital devices, for example listening, reading and dubbing, the LBCs did not complete the work as required. Teachers also reported that the LBCs showed a high level of amotivation, which is defined by Deci and Ryan (2000: 237) as a state when an individual lacks the intention to behave and stands in contrast with intrinsic and extrinsic motivation

as it represents a complete lack of self-determination with respect to the target behaviour. Amotivation is associated with the poorest performance and mental-health outcomes. Learner autonomy is considered to go hand in hand with learner motivation, as demonstrated by Romera and Cecilia (2019: 43), but if students are made responsible for and aware of their own learning, they will become more engaged and intrinsically motivated to learn. Academic success can be achieved when learner autonomy is at the heart of learning in secondary education, be it English or any other language or subject.

The second question explored in the current study regarded the relations between motivation, anxiety and English achievement. We found that motivation and anxiety have a significant impact on English achievement and can predict learners' English achievement to a great extent. There were negative moderate correlations between language anxiety and motivation ($r=-0.453$, $p<0.01$) and language anxiety and language achievement ($r=-.570$, $p<0.01$), while there was a very positive correlation between motivation and language achievement ($r=0.736$, $p<0.01$).

The third issue under inspection was gaining a deeper understanding of LBCs' English learning tendencies from the perspective of their language teachers, as teachers' perspectives might be more sophisticated and comprehensive considering their observations of and interactions with both the LBCs and their families. Interviews with 12 teachers highlighted four primary themes regarding LBCs' English learning: academic underperformance, lack of parental involvement in academic learning, lower levels of technological literacy and higher levels of anxiety in test taking and answering questions. These findings could substantiate the quantitative data and help us to understand the dominant factors accounting for the LBCs' lower levels of motivation and academic underperformance in English learning. Driven particularly by the rich descriptive data reported by language teachers, the following three aspects are discussed with pedagogical implications.

Firstly, teachers can provide favourable classroom environments for motivation to flourish in learners' language learning**.** As demonstrated in this study, learners' motivation contributes a lot to the variations in learners' language proficiency. However, motivation is shaped and sharpened by a myriad of other factors, from which out the role of the teacher (Cook, 2000; Dörnyei, 2000; McDonough, 2007; Wentzel, 1997), and parents' involvement (Bernaus, Moore, & Cordeiro, 2007; Gao, 2006; Gonzalez-DeHass, Willems, & Doan, 2005; Gottfried, Fleming, & Gottfried, 1994) stand out. The teacher's role goes far beyond the provision of reward (itself dependent on the learner's self-efficacy). It involves providing a supportive and challenging learning environment. However, in a large-sized class of over sixty students, teachers may find it hard to give due care to the LBCs, or to devote more time and attention exclusively to the LBCs in class. This was one of the main frustrations reported in the interviews. As expounded by Pearse Romera and Ruiz Cecilia (2019), teachers have the ultimate power to create the best conditions possible for motivation to flourish. They cannot motivate students *per se*, but they can work to provide the conditions for students to become more motivated. Perhaps the most difficult aspect is not doing anything to de-motivate them (McDonough, 2007).

Secondly, parents' role in fostering students' motivation in language learning is no less pivotal than that of the children's' language teachers. It is commonly noted that for young learners, parents' involvement in and attitudes toward language learning are two important factors in foreign language development. Parents' involvement in students' language learn-

ing helps nurture their intrinsic academic motivation. Parental motivational practices that encourage pleasure, curiosity and persistence in the learning process are positively related to children's intrinsic motivation and achievement in an academic sense (Gottfried et al., 1994). Gonzalez-DeHass et al. (2005) reported as follows:

When parents are involved, students report more effort, concentration, and attention. Students are more inherently interested in learning, and they experience higher perceived competence.

In a similar vein, Steinberg, Lamborn, Dornbusch, & Darling (1992) demonstrated that parental practices also have a positive relationship regarding high school students' academic engagement. In terms of LBCs, with whom their parents have little daily contact, let alone an active involvement in their learning processes, the interview findings revealed that parents overemphasised students' scores rather than learning processes, and that they kept in touch with children mainly by telephone or WeChat[1]. Hence, without any academic encouragement from their caregivers, who give priority to students' health and diet, coupled with a void of any parental involvement in their learning, if LBCs are placed in a classroom where they feel unsupported, demotivated or marginalized, chances are that their motivation for language learning will wane day by day.

Thirdly, due to the easy access of information and resources available in the digital age, teachers and parents should help learners increase their technological literacy and use such resources to their advantage. Different stakeholders in education should recognise the potential of using technology in providing access to school resources and learning platforms without time and space limitations. Rod Ellis also pointed out the important role of digital devices in L2 learning at 2019 Global English Education China Assembly:

When I talk to them (Chinese people who achieve high-level proficiency), what emerges is that all of the people who have high levels of proficiency did not necessarily get it from the classroom. They got it from what they do by themselves outside the classroom, watching videos, using the internet to access English materials etc. It's not necessarily just true to China, it's probably true throughout the world that in order to achieve high levels of proficiency, you never just got to do it with what goes on inside the classroom, it's what you are doing by yourself outside classroom that matters.

Mobile and internet programs could be of immense help to learners outside the classroom, where language learning traditionally lacks guidance but actually matters as much as in the classroom. This is particularly true to the learning context of rural China. From the interviews, we found that teachers also realised the importance of digital resources in language learning. Consequently, some teachers have embedded them in language teaching in the classroom and have extended their use outside class.

Besides the ample resources offered by modern technologies, if used properly, these digital devices can also be exploited for parents to engage in supporting, monitoring and assessing the learning experiences of their children. The virtual presence of parents, reflected in the triangular relationship among students, teachers and parents, can not only help to monitor, support and optimise learners' educational experiences, but also enhance learner autonomy and academic achievement.

[1] WeChat is a widely used App in China Mainland (similar to Facebook), providing users with features as text messaging, hold-to-talk voice messaging, broadcast (one-to-many) messaging, video calls and conferencing, video games, photographs and videos sharing. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Left-behind_children_in_China.)

The current study is not without its limitations. For instance, only 69 students were involved in the quantitative study, thus making its representativeness limited to a certain degree. Our overriding purpose was to gain a deeper understanding of this particular community. If future studies are conducted with participants from more secondary schools in various districts, by employing a longitudinal examination, the results should be more convincing and generalizable. Meanwhile, more variables, such as self-efficacy, gender and the socioeconomic status of the family, should be considered in order to capture a more holistic picture of LBCs' English learning. Furthermore, strictly speaking, the present study by nature only detected the correlations among the variables under investigation, which cannot be taken as reflecting their causal relationship. Driven by the findings from the current study, one next tentative step is to obtain data by observing classes and interviewing both LBCs and the parents. This process can substantiate and triangulate the findings from multi-dimensional perspectives, while also helping to implement interventions designed to support LBCs regarding learner autonomy and self-regulation strategies.

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8. Appendices

Appendix A: Items in the EFL motivation scale

I like learning English.

I learn English because I want to know more about cultures of English-speaking countries.

I'll learn English well, because I want to get admitted to a good high school.

I find English is hard to learn, but I keep learning it for my better future.

I can always derive joy from English learning.

I spend more time learning English to balance my academic achievements among different subjects.

I'll try to overcome the challenges in English learning however hard they are.

I'm very attentive in my English class.

I devote more time to English learning than others.

I don't want to spend time listening to or reading English.

I seldom spend time reading other English magazines except for English textbooks.

Appendix B: Items in the EFL anxiety scale

I always think of poor outcomes when taking an exam, e.g. not as good as others, my parents might criticize me.

I dare not raise hands to answer questions in my English class.

I'm afraid the teacher will interrupt me very often and correct errors.

I don't feel my English good enough, so I dare not speak English in class.

I always feel worried that I might not understand before or while listening to English materials.

I dare not share my English work with others who know English better than me.

I'm satisfied with my English learning this semester.

I always feel confident in English class.

I feel at a loss because there're lots of English grammatical rules to master.

I'll copy others' homework when there're problems difficult to solve.

I don't feel confident about learning English well, because my English is poor and I feel others are better than me.

I often think others are better than me in English.

I'm always worried about my poor English results before I receive my academic reports