

# College Student Academic Motivation and Engagement in the College English Course

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**Abstract**—This research examined the relationship between student academic motivation and engagement in the college English course. Based on the current study on communicative language teaching, student academic motivation, and engagement, we hypothesized that student motivation in the English course could predict their engagement. We used the MUSIC model of academic motivation inventory (Jones, 2016b) to explore students' course perceptions, and we added engagement items to the survey. The participants were 101 first-year college students who were enrolled in this English course. The descriptive statistics data presented the main problems the course in terms of empowerment, success, and interest. The stepwise regression results indicated that the components of empowerment and success in the MUSIC model predicted student engagement. The findings revealed that it is possible for Chinese college EFL teachers to use the strategies in the MUSIC model to redesign their instruction to motivate and engage their students in the English coursework.

**Index Terms**—English as a Foreign Language (EFL), Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), the MUSIC model, motivation and engagement in Higher Education

## I. INTRODUCTION

Since China opened its door and took the economic reform in the late 1970s, the college English course has been a compulsory class for each and every Chinese college student (Shu, 2004). Due to the increasing global exchange and international challenges in the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Shu, & Hua, 2009), China's Ministry of Education passed a new college EFL course syllabus in 2004 and called for the communicative language teaching (CLT) approach for students' communicative competence in English (Ministry of Education, 2004). As a result, many researchers argued that college English course should prepare students with communicative capabilities to meet these needs (Shu, 2013). However, in a recent study on college EFL teachers' needs, the researchers found that most college EFL teachers do not necessarily know how to motivate and engage students to learning (Wen & Ren, 2011; Zhou, 2005). In the field of educational psychology, student academic motivation is a topic with long history of nearly seven decades (Weiner, 1990). Researchers have found numerous strategies concerning how to motivate and engage students to the learning (Schunk, Pintrich, & Meece, 2008). Unfortunately, these strategies are not necessarily and popularly used by instructors outside the education field (Jones, 2015). Jones (2009, 2015) grouped these strategies in educational psychology into five components and developed the MUSIC Model of Academic Motivation: eMpowerment, Usefulness, Success, Interest and Caring. This model helps instructors to identify their teaching problems and then redesign their instruction to motivate their students in learning (Jones, 2015; Jones & Wilkins, 2013). Therefore, it is necessary to explore whether the strategies in the MUSIC model are reasonable and practical for the CLT approach in Chinese college EFL class.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

### A. CLT in the College English Syllabus and Its Effectiveness

The calling for the CLT approach in the college English course happened around 2004 when Ministry of Education passed a new syllabus with a focus on student communicative competence (Ministry of Education, 2004). The new

syllabus stated that the goal of the college English course is to improve college students' communicative competence, especially their listening and speaking comprehension. As a result, in the national college English test (NCET), the vocabulary and structure section was cancelled and the percentage of listening section increased from 20% to 35% (Zheng & Cheng, 2008). In order to utilize CLT properly in college English class, it is necessary to conduct research on the feature of CLT and examine whether it was effective in the college English course.

Hymes (1966) was the first person who emphasized that the communicative competence is crucial in the language curriculum. Since then, researchers in ESL/EFL learning agreed that communicative competence is more important than the mastery of the form of the language (Fotos, 2005; Savignon, 2005). Because "the essence of CLT is the engagement of learners in communication to allow them to develop their communicative competence" (Savignon, 2005, p. 635), many methods such as cooperative or collaborative learning, task-based method, and inquiry-based method are included in the CLT approach and they all emphasize language learners' active participation and engagement in the learning process (Littlewood, 2007).

In the realm of college English, many researchers and instructors practiced the CLT approach in the past decade and demonstrated its effectiveness (Shu & Hua, 2009). In a study of 100 first-year College EFL students at a Chinese university, researchers investigated the impact of cooperative learning on students' motivation (Ning, & Hornby, 2014). After 18-week intervention, they found that the use of cooperative learning improved students' intrinsic motivation significantly. In another study, Liu (2007) examined the effectiveness of CLT among 40 first year transportation engineering students by using free discussion, oral presentations, and story construction to deal with the content in the prescribed textbook. The findings indicated that students' spoken English and the test score increased significantly, and they also had a stronger sense of autonomy, usefulness, and interest in the CLT class. Many others also conducted research on the effective use of CLT in Chinese college EFL class (Deng and Zheng, 2008; Rao, 2002; Shi, 2010; Tian, 2007; Zhang and Head, 2010). Taken as a whole, the empirical research on the CLT approach documented that CLT is effective. However, no evidence was reported to show that the use of CLT leads to student engagement, the essence of CLT. Only when we provide empirical evidence of the relationship between motivation and engagement in CLT, can we support the theoretical hypothesis that the implement of CLT leads to student engagement. Because Jones (2009, 2015, 2016a) argued that if teachers use the instructional strategies in the MUSIC model, their students will be more motivated and engaged with the learning, we need to find the evidence to show that the components of the MUSIC model of academic motivation lead to student engagement in learning.

#### *B. The MUSIC Model Components and Student Engagement*

The MUSIC Model of Academic Motivation is a set of instructional strategies based on the current research and theories of student motivation in educational psychology (Jones, 2009, 2015). Jones (2009) argued that students are more motivated and engaged when they perceive that (1) they are empowered, (2) the content is useful, (3) they can be successful, (4) the content and activities are interesting, (5) they feel cared for by teachers and peers in the learning environment (Jones et al., 2015). Given the essence of CLT is student engagement (Fotos, 2005; Savignon, 2005), if we can find evidence that the components of the MUSIC lead to student engagement, it will be reasonable to use the strategies in the MUSIC model in Chinese college EFL class.

In the field of educational psychology, a plethora of research documented that the use of motivation strategies leads to student engagement. In a study of a group of college students enrolled in the organic chemistry course, researchers investigated how teachers' autonomy support affected students' self-regulation and performance (Black & Deci, 2000). Researchers found that students' perceptions of their instructors' autonomy support predicted their increased autonomous self-regulation, perceived competence, and interest/enjoyment, and decrease in anxiety over the semester (Black & Deci, 2000). The change in autonomous self-regulation in turn predicted their performance in the course. In another study, researchers examined the relationships between motivation variables and achievement behaviors among 184 first year Belgian psychology students (Neuville, Frenay, & Bourgeois, 2007). The findings demonstrated that task value is positively related to self-regulated strategies (Neuville et al., 2007). As for the relationships between success and engagement, researchers found that academic self-efficacy positively and significantly predicted academic performance, persistence, and cognitive engagement (DiBenedetto & Bembenuddy, 2013; Multon, Brown, & Lent, 1991; Chemers, Hu, & Garcia, 2001; Joo, Bong, & Choi, 2000). Moreover, the evidence abounds that motivation strategies in interest and caring lead to engagement. For example, Rotgans and Schmidt (2011) investigated the development of situational interest over time and the relationships between situational interest and student academic achievement among 69 polytechnic students. They reported that students' situational interest increased significantly when the problem stimulus was presented. More importantly, researchers found that the situational interest was a significant predictor of academic achievement. In the research on the relationships between caring and engagement, Okpala and Ellis (2005) examined the key components of a high-quality college teacher among 218 U.S. college students. They found that caring for students and their learning (89.6%) ranked as the top among the components of excellent teachers. In another study, researchers examined the factors of effective teaching among 99 college teachers and 231 students (Schaeffer, Epting, Zinn, & Buskist, 2003). The findings showed that both teacher and student groups agreed on 8 of the top ten factors: approachable, creative and interesting, encouraging and caring, enthusiastic, flexible and open-minded, knowledgeable, realistic expectations and fair, and respectful. These studies revealed that teacher's caring is also critical to student learning. All these studies provided evidence that the components of the MUSIC model lead to student

engagement. Consequently, we hypothesized that the components in the MUSIC model lead to student engagement in Chinese college EFL class.

### III. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Researchers in second/foreign language learning agreed that the CLT approach is the signature pedagogy of language curriculum because its focus is student communicative competence and its essence is student engagement (Ham, & Schueller, 2012; Fotos, 2005; Savignon, 2005). However, although there was research on the use of teacher motivational strategies in ESL/EFL learning, there was no rich evidence that CLT leads to student engagement in the research of student motivation in second/foreign language learning (Dörnyei, 1998; Dörnyei & Csizer, 1998; Tremblay & Gardner, 1995). Therefore we plan to provide evidence from a survey of course perceptions based on the MUSIC model inventory that student academic motivation leads to their engagement in the college EFL class. Specifically, we put forward two research questions:

1. What are the main problems in college student academic motivation in their EFL class?
2. Is there evidence that the components of the MUSIC model could predict student engagement in the college EFL class?

### IV. METHOD

#### A. Participants

The participants were 101 first year students enrolled in the college English course at a Chinese university. All of them took the college English course and answered the course perception questionnaire based on the MUSIC model inventory (Jones, 2016b). Sixty four (63.4%) were female and 37 (36.6%) were male students. The majority of the participants reported that their nationality was Han ( $n=100, 99\%$ ), whereas one participant ( $n=1, 1\%$ ) reported he was of a minority nationality.

#### B. Procedure

Participants were solicited from the School of International Education and all of them were enrolled in the compulsory College English course. We used the convenience sampling method to get the sample from three classes.

All of the college students who participated in this survey shared the same instructional syllabus, textbook, and instructor. Their English course consists of two parts: the intensive reading section and the listening comprehension section. The same instructor teaches the two different sections of the college English course. The textbook is *New Horizon College English* (Zheng, 2013).

The survey was conducted by the end of the semester before the final exam. The instructor told the students that their response to the survey was not related to their final grades. Further, the instructors emphasized that the students were volunteers to this survey and they could choose to answer the questionnaire or they could leave the classroom if they did not want to answer it. It took the students twenty minutes to respond to the survey. After the instructor collected the data from the three classes, he put them in the SPSS 20.0 and then sent to the researcher in the U.S. university.

#### C. Measures

We used the 26-item MUSIC model of academic motivation inventory (Jones, 2016b) as the survey in this research. In order to examine the relation between motivation and engagement, we added eight items of engagement into the survey. The last three items were student demographic information such as gender, nationality and class standing. The 26 items of the five components of the MUSIC model included 6-point Likert-type scales. The eight items of engagement included 5-point Likert-type scales. The Cronbach's coefficient  $\alpha$  of each instrument ranged from .68 to .85 (See Table 1).

Next, we measured the component of empowerment in the MUSIC model. A sample item read, "I have options in how to achieve the goals of the course" (response ranges from 1= *strongly disagree* to 6= *strongly agree*). The internal consistency of these five items was acceptable ( $\alpha= .68$ ). We used five items to measure the usefulness component. A sample item read, "The knowledge I gain in this course is important for my future" (response ranges from 1= *strongly disagree* to 6= *strongly agree*). The Cronbach's coefficient  $\alpha$  was .78. The component of success consisted of four items. A sample item read, "I am capable of getting a high grade in this course" (response ranges from 1= *strongly disagree* to 6= *strongly agree*). The Cronbach's coefficient  $\alpha$  was .85. The interest component included six items. A sample item reads, "The coursework is interesting to me" (response ranges from 1= *strongly disagree* to 6= *strongly agree*). The Cronbach's coefficient  $\alpha$  was .81. The final and fifth component of the MUSIC was caring, and it was made up of six items. A sample item read, "The instructor is friendly" (response ranges from 1= *strongly disagree* to 6= *strongly agree*). The Cronbach's coefficient  $\alpha$  was .70.

As a measure of the perceived engagement in the college EFL course, students were evaluated on 5-point Likert-type scales with descriptors at each point (1= *almost never*; 5= *almost always*). This component included eight items. A sample item read, "I check myself to see how well I am understanding what I am studying". The Cronbach's coefficient  $\alpha$  was .80.

D. Data Analysis

First, we examined the reliability estimates of each instrument in the survey, as well as the intercorrelations among the five components of the MUSIC model and the item engagement. The descriptive statistics data illustrated the major problems regarding student academic motivation in their college English class. Next, we used SPSS 20.0 to conduct the stepwise regression in order to examine whether student motivation could predict their engagement.

V. RESULTS

The descriptive statistics and reliability for the five components of the MUSIC model, student engagement, along with the correlations among these constructs were demonstrated in Table 1. Further, from the data analysis results in Table 1, we can identify the major problems in students' academic motivation in the college EFL class.

TABLE 1.  
DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS, RELIABILITIES, AND CORRELATIONS, AMONG THE VARIABLES.

	M	SD	$\alpha$	1	2	3	4	5
1.Empowerment	3.93	0.77	.68					
2.Usefulness	4.92	0.85	.78	.35**				
3.Success	3.32	1.09	.85	.56**	.37**			
4.Interest	3.53	0.86	.81	.34**	.45**	.55**		
5.Caring	4.81	0.55	.70	.30**	.46**	.22*	.40**	
6.engagement	2.81	0.68	.80	.50**	.25*	.51**	.35**	.12

Note. The first five components were rated on a 6-point Likert-format scale.  
The last component was rated on a 5-point Likert-format scale.  
All the correlations among the variables are significant, \*\*  $p < 0.01$ . \*  $p < 0.05$ .

Because there were five components in the MUSIC model, empowerment, usefulness, success, interest, and caring, we identified the components with lower mean value to explore student learning problems with their academic motivation in the English coursework. From Table 1, we found that the components with relatively lower mean values were success ( $M = 3.32$ ), interest ( $M = 3.53$ ), and empowerment ( $M = 3.93$ ).

The data of the correlations among the component of the MUSIC model and student engagement indicated that the components of the MUSIC model correlated to each other positively and significantly,  $p < 0.05$ . The data of the correlation also indicated that all the components of the MUSIC model correlated to the construct of engagement positively and significantly except the component of caring,  $p < 0.05$ .

The third step of data analysis was to examine the effect of the components of the MUSIC model on student engagement. We used stepwise regression to examine such relationships. The data revealed that the components of empowerment and success predicted student engagement positively and significantly,  $F_{(2, 98)} = 23.68$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ,  $\beta = .27, .21$ , respectively,  $p < 0.05$ . The R square is .326, which means the components of empowerment and success can explain 32.6% of the variance in engagement (see Figure 1).

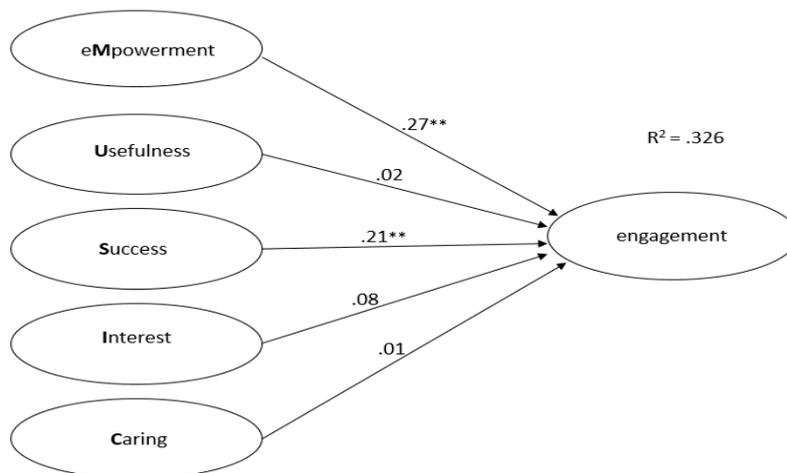


Fig. 1. Stepwise regression results of the relationships among the MUSIC components and student engagement. \*\*  $p < 0.05$ .

VI. DISCUSSION

From the descriptive statistics data, we found that the five components of the MUSIC model correlated with each other closely. These findings are consistent with the features of the MUSIC model described earlier by Jones and Wilkins (2013). Jones and Wilkins (2013) reported that the five components are closely related yet distinct. Therefore, when instructors use the MUSIC model as a measurement to test students' course perceptions, the data will demonstrate

the main problems related to student motivation in the coursework. As a result, the instructors can choose the proper strategies (Jones, 2015) and redesign their instruction. Because of the consistency and distinctness of the components of the MUSIC model, teachers may motivate and engage students in two or more component of the MUSIC model when they only use one strategy of empowerment or success in the teaching practice. Thus, the MUSIC model is a useful tool for instructors to recognize their teaching problems and solve them with feasible strategies (Jones, 2015).

As for the main problems in student academic motivation in the college English class, the data from this research indicated that what the college students lacked most was a sense of success in the college English course. Secondly, they do not have strong interest in the English coursework. Finally, they perceived that they did not have control over some parts of their coursework such as readings, assignments, and class activities. Given the overall perceptions of the College English course, college students are less motivated in their English learning. Therefore, it is urgent for the college EFL teachers to use the relevant instructional strategies in terms of success, interest, and empowerment to redesign their class to motivate and engage students to the learning. Given the different teaching problems in different teachers and universities due to a variety of context, instructors can use the survey to identify the problems and then choose what they need most from the strategies in the MUSIC model rather than practice the strategies from every aspect of the model (Jones, 2015, 2016a).

From the stepwise regression results, it is evident that student motivation in empowerment and success predicts their engagement. This result is significant because it provides evidence that the use of the strategies in the MUSIC model leads to student engagement, the essence of CLT, to the college English coursework (Fotos, 2005; Savignon, 2005). These findings are consistent with the previous research in the relation between academic motivation and engagement (Black & Deci, 2000; Chemers, Hu, & Garcia, 2001; Joo, Bong, & Choi, 2000; Multon, Brown, & Lent, 1991). Further, this research provides evidence that it is reasonable to use the strategies regarding empowerment and success in the MUSIC model for the CLT approach in Chinese college EFL course.

Although only two components, empowerment and success, predict student engagement, it is possible that interest and caring work to support the other components of the MUSIC model because other researchers have documented interest and caring to be important component of a motivating and engaging classroom environment (Jones, 2016a, 2016b). Because the subjects in this research are adult college students, they know the usefulness of the college course for their short- and long-term goals in life. As a result, it is possible that college EFL teachers will motivate and engage students to the English coursework when they try the strategies related to empowerment and success. Because of the positive and significant correlations between the five components of the MUSIC model, it is possible that students' sense of interest will increase when instructors make use of the strategies relevant to empowerment and success. Because context is a crucial element in the field of teaching and learning (Christenson, Reschly, Wylie, & SpringerLink, 2012; Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004), college EFL teachers should examine both the survey results from the MUSIC model and the local characteristics for students' English learning in order to help students become the genuine life-long learners.

## VII. STUDY LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

There are some limitations in this study. First, the sample size was not every large, only 101 first year college students who were enrolled in the college English course participated in the survey. Although this number is acceptable for the research in social science, we could provide more fine-tuned evidence that the MUSIC model is ideal and practical for Chinese college EFL class. Second, we did not conduct a longitudinal study on the effectiveness of the CLT supported by the MUSIC model. The research results would be more meaningful if we conduct research for a semester or a school year. If we conduct paired t-Test regarding student achievement in the college English course, it would be more significant for college EFL students and instructors. If the use of MUSIC model could predict student achievement, instructors could use the relevant strategies in the MUSIC model and help students pass the national college English test (CET) and obtain the certificate, which is critical in the workforce. Finally, more data from interview and self-report both from teachers and students would enrich the generalization of this research.

## VIII. CONCLUSION

The findings from this research provide evidence that it is possible for the instructors to motivate and engage students in their EFL class by empowering students, providing them with more activities contributing to their sense of success, and fostering students' interest in instruction and class activities. Although the components of usefulness, interest, and caring are not significantly predict student engagement, it is possible that usefulness, interest, and caring work to support the other components of the MUSIC model because other researchers have documented these components to be an important component of a motivating and engaging classroom environment (Jones, 2009, 2015, 2016b). Given the MUSIC model has been used for learning and instruction nearly two decades (Jones, 2016a), it is hoped that it will be used and beneficial to Chinese college EFL class.

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