

# Motivation and English Attainment: A Comparative Study of Hong Kong Students with Different Cultural Backgrounds

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The main objective of this study is to investigate the motivation patterns of the two groups of Hong Kong students with different cultural backgrounds and examine the relationship between their motivation to learn English and English attainment. This study adopts the motivation framework of Dornyei (2001) to investigate the extent each social specific motivation component affects respective group of students' motivation to learn English. Results suggest that peer is the most influential factor affecting students' motivation to learn while parents play the least significant role. Attempts are also made to see how specific motivational components relate to English attainment. Results indicate that both groups of students' English attainment are positively correlated to course-specific motivation while teacher-specific motivation holds contrastive correlations with the two groups of students. With the results of this study, it is hoped that educators will be able to understand the fundamental differences between the two groups of students in terms of motivation and learning needs. Light can also be shed on shaping different teaching methodologies when teaching students with different cultural backgrounds.

Achievement motivation theory suggests that people are moved to take action by a need to achieve or to be successful. Gardner's researches are the most influential wherein he suggested that greater efforts from learners were encouraged by motivation, thus leading to greater success in language performance (1985, 1992, 1995). Meanwhile, this area of study was investigated with further details by a number of scholars (e.g. Chandrasegaran, 1979; Okada, Oxford & Abo, 1996; Oxford & Shearin, 1994, Paitoonpong, 1980; Spolsky 1969). However, these studies were only investigated in general terms, and did not relate to specific cultural context.

In the 80s and 90s, motivational studies were conducted and started to be culturally specific. Pierson, Fu and Lee (1980) found six factors significantly related to Hong Kong (HK) secondary school students' English proficiency: 1) freedom of language choice; 2) desire to learn English; 3) lack of self-confidence in using English; 4) approbation for using English; 5) discomfort over Chinese speakers using English; and 6) English as a mark of education. Since then, research done on relations between motivation and English attainment in HK context started to flourish. Pierson, Fu and Lee (1980), Deci & Ryan (1985) Strong (1984) and Richards (1993) all found a

strong positive correlation between Hong Kong students' intrinsic motivation and high English attainment. Pennington and Yue (1993) later stated that there was a strong motivation for students in HK to learn English in the context of imminent changes of sovereignty in 1997. Lin & Detaramani (1998) also indicated that most tertiary students were very much extrinsically motivated to learn English. The motivating force lied upon the immediate need of learning and using the L2, not from their anticipated future goals. Tertiary students with high English attainment tended to be more intrinsically motivated than extrinsically motivated. The latest motivation research also echoed Lin & Detaramani's result and claimed that HK students' academic achievement was not related to learning goals (Chan, Lai, Leung & Moore, 2005).

Littlewood (1996) further explained that students' eagerness to communicate with English-speaking people might point to intrinsic motivation; however, students commented that their eagerness to learn was due to the predominantly Cantonese-speaking environment. That is, students communicate with English-speaking people due also to extrinsic reasons. Littlewood (1996) concluded that students' overall strong motivation and positive attitudes toward English and interacting with English speaking people indicated a set of schemata favorable to learning.

Most of the past studies mentioned above are related to one particular sort of motivation and its relations to a particular context. There has been no comprehensive study that investigated how social setting as a whole exerts influence on different cultural groups of learners' English learning motivation and its relations to attainment, especially in the context of Hong Kong.

Since 1997, the number of Mainland Chinese children coming to Hong Kong to unite with their families has been increasing. Adaptation to the local education system and the challenges posed by the new English learning environment are the issues these children need to deal with. There are also tremendous differences in terms of English exposure between the locally born Hong Kong (LBHK) students and the newly arrived Hong

Kong (NAHK) students: First of all, English is a compulsory subject throughout the nine-year Hong Kong compulsory education system. Although China has also adopted a nine-year compulsory schooling system, foreign languages such as English are optional courses in primary education. Also, English has been incorporated in other subjects taught in schools for many years in Hong Kong; but this is not the case in Mainland China. Finally, English and Chinese are both the official languages in Hong Kong and English has long been widely used in various business sectors, government, and international trade. It is known that it is difficult to get a good job without sufficient English proficiency in Hong Kong. However, it is still possible to get a good job without any proficiency of English in China although English is now becoming important in international trade and business sectors.

Because of the aforementioned differences, NAHK students differ from the LBHK students in terms of their English proficiency, English learning environment and English exposure, which may affect their respective motivation to learn and English attainment. Also, what are the social factors affecting the respective group's motivation to learn English and their English attainment? To better help and equip educators in teaching students with different cultural backgrounds, an understanding of the fundamental differences between the two groups in terms of their learning motivation and English attainment will be necessary.

## PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

This study aims to examine the motivation patterns of the two groups of students and how they are different from each other; and ascertain whether the respective groups of students' learning motivation has correlations with English attainment. To answer these questions, it is hypothesized that peer plays the most important factor affecting students' motivation to learn English while parents plays the least significant role; LBHK students' motivation is significantly stronger than that of NAHK students; and both groups of students' motivation are

positively correlated with English attainment. When comparing the differences between the motivation patterns, it is hypothesized that LBHK students have stronger motivation than NAHK students.

## METHODOLOGY

### *Participants*

In this study, two groups of students, with the total number of 50 NAHK students and LBHK students participated voluntarily in this study. The NAHK students groups comprised the total intake of 25 NAHK teenagers who arrived in HK from China to unite with their families in 2004 and were admitted to a local secondary school in the same year. To control variables, the numbers of samples of the two groups were the same. Both groups had 25 students, 10 males and 15 females. They were all studying in Form 2 (ages 15—16) in 2004—2005 but in different classes. Length of schooling in HK was the same.

### *Instrumentation*

#### *Questionnaire*

The questionnaire administered in this study consisted of 48 closed questions. Three statements were constructed for each sub-component under each motivational component of the proposed version of Dornyei's (2001) extended framework. A six-point Likert scale was adopted for respondents to indicate their responses ranging from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree." A pilot study confirmed that a six-point scale was effective in lowering respondents' tendency to choose the central response. Chinese was the language used in the questionnaire as students are most comfortable with their first language.

A reliability test on the questionnaire was run to test if there was an internal consistency of all the 48 items set. The internal consistency (Cronbach alphas) for the motivational components was high, with an alpha value of 0.852.

### *English Attainment Test*

The English examination was an internal standardized test taken by all students in the same form. All subjects took part in the exam. The examination paper consisted of four papers: (1) listening, (2) writing, (3) reading and (4) speaking. Each paper carried equal weight.

To ensure the reliability of the English tests, the test-retest method was adopted to see if the first set of scores was correlated with the second set of scores. The correlations found were 0.83 (listening) and 0.74 (reading). The internal consistency (Cronbach alphas) were high: they were 0.72 (listening) and 0.68 (reading) respectively. However, the reliability of the speaking and writing could not be reported in the same manner because the tests were not item-based. The writing and speaking papers were assessed by senior teachers according to detailed descriptive criteria. 10% of the sample writing scripts and oral assessment tapes were randomly double-marked. Analysis of the paired markers' given marks produced correlations of 0.84 for the writing paper and 0.78 for the speaking paper.

### *Data Analysis*

To decide which motivational factor was more significantly influential in affecting students' motivation to learn English, mean scores and standard deviation were calculated. Independent sample *t*-test in an Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was also used to determine if there was any significant differences between different practices employed by the two groups of researchers. The groups were considered independent if a member of one group could not possibly be in the other group. The significance level was set at  $p < 0.05$ . Since multiple comparisons were to be made within the same dataset, the probability of observing a sizable difference one of the comparisons increased with the number of comparisons made. To control Type I error, the significance level after Bonferroni adjustments was set to  $p < 0.001$  (0.05/50). This adjustment controlled very tightly for false positives.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: MODIFICATION OF DORNYEI'S FRAMEWORK OF L2 MOTIVATION**

In this study, the learning situation level of Dornyei's (2001) extended framework on L2 motivation was adopted because the elements and factors in the framework were all relevant to the samples selected for the study.

Dornyei's model consisted of three levels of motivation: language level, learner level and learning situation level. The level of learning situation of Dornyei's framework was adopted in this empirical study as this study mainly dealt with the social aspect of motivational factors affecting English attainment rather than the relationship of the two from a psychological point of view. This framework included most of the important social factors considered by the past researches as having impact on language learning.

According to Dornyei, course-specific motivational components were related to syllabus, teaching materials, teaching methods and learning tasks. Teacher-specific motivational components referred to teachers' behavior, personality and teaching style while group-specific motivational components related to group's goal orientations, cohesiveness, norm, reward system, and classroom goal structure.

To increase representativeness, one element had been added to Dornyei's framework—*parent-specific motivational component*. Interestingly, he also noted that parental influence played a large part in students learning motivation although he did not include it as a component in his framework. According to the research to date (e.g. Douglas, 1967; Brophy, 1987, Wlodkowski & Jaynes, 1990; Gottfried, Fleming & Gottfried, 1994), the parent is one of the primary impacts on students' learning motivation. As Wlodkowski & Jaynes (1990)

**Table 1**  
**Extension of Dornyei's Extended Framework (1994)**

<b>Learning Situation Level</b>	
<i>Course-Specific Motivation Components</i>	Interest (in the course) Relevance (of the course to one's needs) Expectancy (of success) Satisfaction (one has in the outcome)
<i>Teacher-Specific Motivational Components</i>	Affiliative motive (to please the teacher) Authority type (autonomy-supporting) Direct Socialization of Motivation *Modeling *Task Presentation *Feedback
<i>Group-Specific Motivational Components</i>	Goal-orientations Norm & Reward System Group Cohesion Classroom Goal Structure (cooperative)
<i>*Parent-Specific Motivation Component</i>	Education Background Financial Support Affective Encouragement

\* New motivation component added to Dornyei's (2001) extended framework.

concluded, effective families had a set of characteristics such as family income, education, and ethnic background. Effective families also displayed a number of positive attitudes and behaviours toward their children which helped them succeed in school.

Due to the incomplete list of Dornyei's (2001) framework, the component of *parent-specific motivation* was added which could be broken down into further constituents to fit the context of Hong Kong:

- Education background (*parents' proficiency in English and ability to offer guidance to their children*)
- Financial support (*technical support, provided by parents to facilitate their children's English learning, such as hiring tutor, buying reference books or computer*)
- Affective encouragement (*the supportive family climate, like verbal encouragement to their children*)

## RESULTS

### The Motivation Patterns of the Two Groups of Students

#### *Peer influences students' learning motivation most*

Data show that for LBHK students, the motivational component with the highest mean is

group-specific motivation; teacher-specific motivation comes second; course-specific motivation comes third while parent-specific motivation comes last. Interestingly, the statistical results of NAHK students' are similar, as can be seen in Table 2. Group-specific motivation indicates a mean of 4.56; teacher-specific motivation shows a mean of 4.4; course-specific motivation has a mean of 3.78; while parents-specific motivation indicates the lowest mean of all. If two groups of students' overall motivation are to be compared, LBHK students have a higher mean of 4.41 while NAHK students show a mean of 4.01. The results suggested that peers played the most significant role in motivating students' to learn English.

Further looking into the details of the statistical results, it was obvious that all statements listed in Table 3 were derived from group-specific motivation, which drew a clear picture that LBHK students were influenced by their peers most during their process of learning English.

Similar results were also found among NAHK students: they also expressed that peers influenced their English learning most. Table 4 shows the statements NAHK students most agreed with. Therefore, this study concluded that peers played the most significant role in influencing HK students' motivation to learn English, regardless of their cultural background.

**Table 2**  
**Descriptive Statistics—Motivational Components**

	LBHK students		NAHK students	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Group-specific Motivation	4.79	0.34	4.56	0.42
Teacher-specific Motivation	4.59	0.37	4.40	0.37
Course-specific Motivation	4.36	0.46	3.78	0.56
Parent-specific Motivation	3.90	0.78	3.57	0.55
Overall Motivation	4.41	0.34	4.08	0.34

**Table 3**  
**Means and SD for Statements LBHK Students Most Agreed with**

Statement Number	Motivational Component	Statement	Mean	SD
11	Group-Specific Motivation	Learning English with my friends together is better than learning it by myself.	5.56	0.71
35	Group-Specific Motivation	I know the reason for learning English.	5.40	0.65
33	Group-Specific Motivation	Most of my classmates obey what our English teacher instructs us to do.	5.40	0.82
36	Group-Specific Motivation	If my friends are good in English, I want to be good at English too.	5.16	0.80
16	Group-Specific Motivation	I enjoy learning English with my class.	5.16	1.25

\*This table only listed statements with means of 5.10 or above.

**Table 4**  
**Means and Standard Deviation for Statements NAHK students Most Agreed with**

Statement Number	Motivational Component	Statement	Mean	SD
33	Group-Specific Motivation	Most of my classmates obey what our English teacher instructs us to do.	5.56	0.65
13	Group-Specific Motivation	I understand why I must work hard on my English.	5.16	0.75
35	Group-Specific Motivation	I know the reason for learning English.	5.12	0.72
29	Teacher-Specific Motivation	I agree with my English teacher when he/she points out my mistakes.	5.12	0.66
36	Group-Specific Motivation	If my friends are good they English, I want to be good at English too.	5.04	0.73

• This table only listed statements with means of 5.00 or above.

### Parents have the least influence on students' motivation

A glance at Table 5 indicates which motivation component influenced students' process learning of English least. Table 5 shows that parents play the least significant role in

affecting both groups of students' motivation to learn English.

To further understand why parents played such a minor role in motivating their children's motivation to learn English, Table 5 and 6 may be of help. As shown in Tables 5 and 6, the

**Table 5**  
**Means and Standard Deviation for Statements LBHK Students Most Disagreed with**

Statement Number	Motivational Component	Statement	Mean	SD
27	Parent-Specific Motivation	I think my parents' English is good enough to communicate with native English speakers.	2.92	1.17
39	Parent-Specific Motivation	My parents can point out my mistakes in English.	2.96	1.69
14	Parent-Specific Motivation	My parents can teach me English when I need them to.	3.20	1.68

- *This table only listed statements with means of under 3.50.*

**Table 6**  
**Means and Standard Deviation for Statements NAHK students Most Disagreed with**

Statement Number	Motivational Component	Statement	Mean	SD
27	Parent-Specific Motivation	I think my parents' English is good enough to communicate with native English speakers.	1.64	1.22
39	Parent-Specific Motivation	My parents can point out my mistakes in English	1.76	1.27
14	Parent-Specific Motivation	My parents can teach me English when I need them to.	2.08	1.32
18	Course-Specific Motivation	I am happy with my English test results.	2.48	1.22
23	Course-Specific Motivation	I think English is not difficult to learn.	2.88	1.05
28	Course-Specific Motivation	I believe I am a competent English-user.	3.04	1.10
4	Course-Specific Motivation	So far I am happy with my progress in learning English.	3.20	1.38
42	Teacher-Specific Motivation	I understand my English teacher's instructions.	3.32	1.03

- *This table only listed statements with means of under 3.50.*

statements that elicit the weakest agreement by both LBHK and NAHK students were the same. These three statements were all related

to parent-specific motivation and pointed out that their parents' English proficiency was not enough to help with their English work.

**Comparison of the Motivation Patterns of the Two Groups of Students**

***LBHK students’ motivation is significantly stronger than that of NAHK students***

Although it was known that peer influenced students’ motivation most and parents affected the least, whether all motivational components elicited significantly different responses from the two groups of students still remain unknown. The following tables reveal that

- *Course-specific motivation*  
Significance differences were found when LBHK and NAHK students’ course-specific motivations were compared. The mean for LBHK students was 4.35 (*SD* = 0.46) while the mean for the NAHK students was 3.78 (*SD* = 0.56). This difference was significant ( $t = 3.94, p < 0.001$ ) and could not be attributed to chance.

- *Group-specific motivation*  
No significant differences were found between LBHK and NAHK students with regard to group-specific motivation. The mean for LBHK students was 4.79 (*SD* = 0.34) while the mean for NAHK students was 3.56 (*SD* = 0.42). This difference between the two groups was non-significant.
- *Teacher-specific motivation*  
Likewise, no significant difference was found between LBHK and NAHK students with regard to teacher-specific motivation. The mean for LBHK students was 4.59 (*SD* = 0.37) while the mean for the NAHK students is 3.40 (*SD* = 0.37). This difference was not significant ( $t = 1.76, p > 0.05$ ), therefore the two groups were not really different with regard to teacher-specific motivation.

**Table 7**  
**Summary Statistics of Students’ Course-Specific Motivation**

	Origin	N	Mean	SD	t value	Significance
<b>Course-Specific Motivation</b>	<b>LBHK Students</b>	25	4.357	0.462	3.945	$p < 0.001$
	<b>NAHK Students</b>	25	3.783	0.561		

**Table 8**  
**Summary Statistics of Students’ Group-Specific Motivation**

	Origin	N	Mean	SD	t value	Significance
<b>Group-Specific Motivation</b>	<b>LBHK Students</b>	25	4.787	0.339	2.106	$p < 0.04NS$
	<b>NAHK Students</b>	25	3.560	0.416		

**Table 9**  
**Summary Statistics of Students' Teacher-Specific Motivation**

	Origin	N	Mean	SD	<i>t</i> value	Significance
Teacher-Specific Motivation	LBHK Students	25	4.589	0.366	1.762	$p < 0.084$ NS
	NAHK Students	25	3.405	0.372		

**Table 10**  
**Summary Statistics of Students' Parent-Specific Motivation**

	Origin	N	Mean	SD	<i>t</i> value	Significance
Parent-Specific Motivation	LBHK Students	25	3.900	0.783	1.752	$p < 0.086$ NS
	NAHK Students	25	3.560	0.569		

**Table 11**  
**Summary Statistics of Students' Overall Motivation**

	Origin	N	Mean	SD	<i>t</i> value	Significance
Overall Motivation	LBHK Students	25	4.408	0.337	3.430	$p < 0.001$
	NAHK Students	25	4.080	0.344		

- *Parent-specific motivation*

Comparing LBHK students and NAHK students' parent-specific motivation, there was no significant difference found. The mean for LBHK students was 3.90 ( $SD = 0.78$ ) while the mean for the NAHK students was 3.56 ( $SD = 0.57$ ). This difference was not significant ( $t = 1.75$ ,  $p > 0.05$ ), therefore the two groups were not really different with regard to teacher-specific motivation.

- *Overall motivation*

Although course-specific motivation was the only specific motivation found to be significantly different between the two groups of students, a significant difference was also found in their overall motivation. The mean for LBHK students was 4.408 ( $SD = 0.337$ ) while the mean for the NAHK students was 4.080 ( $SD = 0.344$ ). The difference was significant,  $t = 3.403$ ,  $p < 0.001$ , and could not be attributed to chance.

Table 12 summarizes the results of all independent samples *t*-tests. This study found that course-specific was the motivation significantly different between the two groups; while others were statistically non-significant.

Further, statistics also showed that LBHK students had stronger motivation as compared to NAHK students as HK students were found to possess a stronger mean on course-specific motivation (4.36 vs 3.78), group-specific motivation (4.79 vs 3.56), teacher-specific motivation (4.59 vs 3.40), and parent-specific motivation (3.90 vs 3.56). Generally speaking, LBHK students had stronger motivation as compared to NAHK students (4.41 vs 4.08). This proved that LBHK students' motivation was stronger than that of NAHK students'.

**Relations between Students' Learning Motivation and English Attainment**

**Correlation between Motivational Component and English Attainment**

*LBHK students' motivation has negative correlation with their English attainment.*

According to the English test results, LBHK students' average English score was 58.3 (*SD* = 15.88) and the average score of NAHK students was 49.6 (*SD* = 15.22). In order to explore the degree and the direction of a relationship between motivation and English attainment, the Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient (*r*) was calculated. The overall motivation and each motivational

**Table 12**  
**Summary of Independent *t*-test Results**

Motivational Component	Student group	Stronger Motivation	Statistical Significance
Course - Specific Motivation	LBHK Students	√	<i>p</i> < 0.001
	NAHK students		
Group - Specific Motivation	LBHK Students	√	NS
	NAHK students		
Teacher - Specific Motivation	LBHK Students	√	NS
	NAHK students		
Parent - Specific Motivation	LBHK Students	√	NS
	NAHK students		
Overall Motivation	LBHK Students	√	<i>p</i> < 0.001
	NAHK students		

**Table 13**  
**Summary of Correlation between LBHK students' Motivation and their English Attainment**

Motivational Component	Correlation Coefficient ( <i>r</i> )	Relationship
Course-Specific Motivation	0.25	Direct/Positive
Group-Specific Motivation	-0.34	Inverse/Negative
Teacher-Specific Motivation	-0.48	Inverse/Negative
Parent-Specific Motivation	-0.19	Inverse/Negative
<b>Overall</b>	<b>-0.238</b>	<b>Inverse/Negative</b>

**Table 14**  
**Summary of Correlation between NAHK students' Motivation and their English Attainment**

Motivational Component	Correlation Coefficient (r)	Relationship
Course-Specific Motivation	0.061	Direct/Positive
Group-Specific Motivation	0.184	Direct/Positive
Teacher-Specific Motivation	0.154	Direct/Positive
Parent-Specific Motivation	-0.322	Inverse/Negative
<b>Overall</b>	<b>0.007</b>	Direct/Positive

component were compared with English attainment respectively (Please refer to Table 13).

From the overall result, it was found that LBHK students' motivation had negative correlation with their English attainment. However, there was one interesting result found—course specific motivation was the only motivational component that had positive correlations with English attainment in the group of LBHK students. Details will be discussed in the next section.

***NAHK students' motivation has positive correlation with their English attainment.***

After examining the correlation of LBHK student motivation and English attainment, this study explored the correlation between NAHK students and English attainment. Table 14 summarizes the results.

Results showed that the overall motivation of NAHK students' motivation had positive correlation with English attainment. However, there was also one interesting picture projected by the statistical results—most motivational components, except parent-specific motivation, had positive correlation with English attainment. Parent-specific motivation had the strongest negative relationship with English attainment. Its implications will be discussed in the next section.

## DISCUSSION

### ***Peers and English Attainment***

An increasing number of studies (e.g. Ehrman & Dornyei, 1998) in educational psychology are

looking into the role of peers and its influence on students' process of learning. The power of norms and social identity govern and play a major role in students' learning behavior. In this study, peers also turned out to be the most influential factor in determining students' learning motivation. A probable explanation for this learning behavior can be attributed to the norm of the groups. Peers can affect students' motivation through social comparison, social competence, peer learning, and peer-group influences. Students compare themselves with their peers on where they stand academically and socially. Moreover, adolescents are more likely to engage in social comparison, especially with those who are similar to them in age, ability and interests.

Results also indicated that the power of peers in motivating learners to conform and social interactions with peers had a large influence on their behavior because the presence of others altered students' learning motivation. Yang's work (1988) portrays a characteristic of Chinese achievement motivation. That is, other people rather than the individual usually define the label of achievement. As Ehrman & Dornyei (1998) clearly state, norms regulated students' own behavior, make task accomplishment possible, and also enhances or decreases students' academic goal striving and learning achievement. If the pattern of perception towards learning English among the ethnic group is generally positive, the whole group will cultivate a positive attitude of learning English and result in positive academic achievement. The group of NAHK students is an example of this case as the results showed that there was positive correlation

between their group-specific motivation and English attainment.

However, the results of LBHK students' group-specific motivation did not show positive correlation with English attainment but instead showed an inverse relationship. According to the questionnaire response, the LBHK students did compare with their fellow students, just like the NAHK students, and wanted to do as well as their fellow students; however, many of their fellow students were not good models to learn from—they did not hand in their English homework on time nor obeyed their teachers. In other words, their fellow students in terms of English learning do not positively affect LBHK students because there is a lack of good examples to follow in their process of learning English.

Another possible reason to explain the negative correlation between peers and English attainment is that, the LBHK students have been in the same class for a long time; they do not need to use learning English to obtain any new or further social recognition from their peers, so they are not as stimulated by group-specific motivation as the NAHK students are although LBHK students' group-specific motivation is high in comparison with other motivation components. On the other hand, new social surroundings and environment urges NAHK students to acquire social recognition from their peers. For the sake of integration and acculturation, the NAHK students need to adapt to similar social behavior and pursue similar studying patterns as their peers.

### ***Parent and English Attainment***

Scholars like Wlodkowski and Jaynes (1990), Gottfried et al. and Eccles et al. (in Dornyei, 2001) believe that parents, apart from peers, also play a major role in affecting students' motivation to learn as parents' support is the main reference point reinforcing students' goals during their process of learning. As Brophy (1987) also states, motivation to learn is a competence acquired through general experience but stimulated most directly through modeling, communication of expectations, and direct instruction or socialization by significant

others, especially parents and teachers. Children's home environment shapes the initial constellation of learning attitudes. When parents nurture their children to learn by encouraging them to explore and ask questions, they will develop a sense of competence and self-efficacy and autonomy which help enhancing their motivation to learn.

However, the result of the present study showed that parents played the least role in affecting students' motivation and it held inverse relationship with both groups of students' English attainment, which echoed the results of Paitoonpong (1980): teachers, not parents, had significant influence on students' motivation.

To understand the parents' role in students' motivation, one needs to focus on their demographic characteristics (such as education level and family structure) and child-rearing practices (such as providing the right amount of encouragement and support). Very often, parents with higher education are more likely than the less educated parents to believe that their involvement in their child's education is important to their child's education.

Therefore, to understand why parents play the least significant role in motivating their children to learn English, a further look at the demographic characteristics of the subjects' parents is necessary. First of all, most parents in this study were working class, they could hardly find time to communicate with and help their children. Home environment thus did not cultivate students' motivation to learn. In addition, the parents' educational level might not be sufficient to solve their children's English problems neither. When students do not have the right academic support, they tend to give up which will certainly devastate their learning motivation. Furthermore, sometimes the family income can barely support the expenses of the whole family making it difficult for the parents to buy extra reference books, or hire tutors to resolve their children's academic problems. All the above reasons explain why parents have the least positive influence on students' learning motivation and hold inverse relationship with English attainment.

### ***Course and English Attainment***

This study found that both LBHK students and NAHK students' course-specific motivation were positively correlated with their English attainment. That is, students of both groups found the curriculum and the learning tasks meaningful and useful in enhancing their motivation to learn English.

What course-specific motivational components specifically motivate students' English learning can be traced to Dornyei's (2001) explanation. There are four important factors determining their intention to learn. They are: interest, relevance, expectancy and satisfaction. In this study, both groups of students were found to share the same beliefs. They believed interests sustained their curiosity and desire to learn. It is part of intrinsic motivation. They also believed they would have better results if what they were learning in English class connected with their values, goals and personal needs. Both groups of students also believed that they would put more effort in dealing with the tasks if they had the self-confidence and self-efficacy. Finally, they would have better English attainment if a sense of satisfaction could be gained from the course and it maintained their sense of pride and enjoyment during their process of learning English. All these four indicators show that both groups of students see the direct relationships between English attainment and course-specific motivation.

### ***Teachers and English Attainment***

It is apparent that the NAHK students' teacher-specific motivation had positive correlation and direct relationship with their English attainment while LBHK students had the opposite.

For NAHK students, teachers play a key figure in their learning process as teachers provide students with mentoring, guidance and support. Factors like teachers' personality, professional knowledge, enthusiasm, commitment, and professional classroom management skills all have direct and multiple multiple influences on their learning motivation. As Dornyei (2001) indicated, students adopted similar beliefs, attitudes, expectations and associated behaviours through

the channels of teachers' communication of beliefs, expectations and attitudes. This result pointed to the same direction as other studies (see Palardy, 1969; Dusek & O'Connell, 1973; Burstall, 1970, 1974; Anastasiow & Espinosa, 1966; Aspy & Roebuck, 1972; Hughes, 1973; Brophy & Good, 1970; Rist, 1970, in Burstall, 1978) that student's positive relationship with teachers correlated with their language acquisition.

However, LBHK students have been influenced by tremendous educational reform in the past few decades. They are believed to be tired of traditional teacher-centered and grammar-translation approach. The government in the past few years has also emphasized learners' autonomy. Due to changes in society, government and ideology, students now are more independent in terms of what they want to learn and how to learn. Students are also more expressive; they speak up and express their opinion regarding teachers' teaching methodologies and syllabi. The role of teachers has been becoming passive and proactive. LBHK students do not rely on teachers as heavily as a decade ago. The above-mentioned reasons are the probable explanations for the motivations of LBHK students to have a negative correlation with English attainment.

### ***LBHK students' motivation to learn English is stronger than that of NAHK students'***

The two groups of students showed significant differences in their motivation patterns. The means of LBHK students' motivation was higher than the NAHK students'. There are several possible explanations for NAHK students having weaker motivation than LBHK students.

First of all, one can attribute the situation to the unfamiliarity of NAHK students with the HK education environment because these students' home culture differs significantly from that of Hong Kong, such as ideology and living styles. NAHK students may find it difficult to succeed in the new school environment, thus may experience anxiety, frustration, anger and depression associated with cultural shock. Environmental changes also lead to lowered

perception of competence and heighten anxiety over one's performance.

On one hand, the exposure to English for students from China may be less than those students born in Hong Kong. On the other hand, home culture of the NAHK students is also different from that of HK. Being able to master good English proficiency is almost a must in Hong Kong, while in China, the situation is different. Having realized the importance of English in HK, NAHK students' attitudes towards English were totally changed.

Furthermore, one can also see that HK parents play a more important role in their children's process of learning English than the NAHK students'. A closer look at the family structure of the students' family may give us an answer. One of the possible reasons is that the income of the local students' families is higher than that of NAHK students' because both the mothers and fathers are working. However, for NAHK students' families, most of the mothers are housewives and only their fathers are working. In some families, both the fathers and mothers, are unemployed and receiving subsidies from the government. Their financial status is therefore insufficient to provide financial support for their children. Further, most HK parents, if they were educated in HK or had experienced compulsory schooling system, should be able to master at least some English, which means they may be able to help their children's academic problems in some situations although only at a very low level.

Because of the above-mentioned reasons, the NAHK students may therefore tend to possess negative attitudes towards learning English, which adversely affect their motivation and English attainment.

### LIMITATIONS OF STUDY

When conducting this study, there were some limitations with respect to the analysis and data that might have affected the accuracy of the results. The sample size for this study was small ( $N=50$ ). A

small sample size means it is harder to find significant relationships from the data, as statistical tests normally require a larger sample size to justify that the effect did not just happen by chance alone. Extra care was therefore taken when data and findings were being generalized in this study. Secondly, the participants of this study were drawn from the same school in Hong Kong. This study could have drawn participants from at least one school in each Hong Kong district to increase the validity of the findings. Finally, the study would have benefited from additional qualitative information on attitudes and behavioral aspects obtained through in-depth interviews and focus group discussions.

### CONCLUSIONS

This study explored the relationship between motivation and English attainment for two groups of students in Hong Kong. Results showed that parents played the least significant role and that parental guidance was not sufficient during students' process of learning English. Parents' education and financial status were the foremost problems, which indirectly devastated students' learning motivation. Therefore, if the government and the school can provide help to families in order to help parents to participate more in their children's education, students' learning motivation can be enhanced.

Meanwhile, this study demonstrated the importance of peers in students' process of learning. Social recognition and acknowledgement are the main keys for simulating students' motivation to learn English and eagerness to gain better academic results.

In addition, it is evident that both groups of students' course-specific motivations were positively correlated with their English attainment. Hence, this study can attribute both groups of students' English attainment to their sense of interest in the course, relevance of the course to their needs, expectancy of success, and satisfaction in the outcome.

NAHK students' teacher-specific motivation has a direct relationship with their English

attainment because they tended to consider their teachers the main source of learning. Nevertheless, negative relationship was found between LBHK students' teacher-specific motivation and English attainment. This study believes that the possible reasons were that LBHK students are becoming more independent in terms of what they wanted to learn and how to learn. In other words, the role of teachers is becoming secondary and proactive.

With the results of this study, schools can understand the fundamental differences between the two groups of students in terms of motivation and learning needs. The most prominent problem that the government should not neglect is the adaptation of the NAHK students. They need substantial English remedial classes to help them realize the importance of English and catch up with the English standard in Hong Kong. It is also hoped that educators will consider whether different teaching methodologies should be adopted when teaching these two groups of students whose cultural backgrounds are rather different.

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