
Learning Interest: A Review of Studies and Implications for Future Research Directions in Second Language Acquisition

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Abstract: Interest is regarded by researchers in educational psychology to be a crucial factor in individuals' learning process. It has been extensively studied in educational psychology and various educational disciplines. However, it has not attracted sufficient research efforts in the field of language learning. This study provides an overview of the interest factor as well as an in-depth analysis of related studies on learning interest, including the triggers, effects, influencing factors and development of situational interest and individual interest, which are the two categories of learning interest. Following the overview of related studies done in subject areas other than language learning and teaching, the paper also examines the interest studies focused specifically on second language acquisition or foreign language learning. Based on the discussions and analysis, the author suggests the directions and avenues of future studies for researchers of language learning and teaching, proposing the expanded research scope and deepened research foci for both situational and individual interests. This study aims at bringing the interest factor into the field of language teaching and research so as to expand the scope of research topics in this field. More importantly, this overview article may also provide a new perspective and effective means to invigorate language learning classroom and maximize language learning outcomes.

Keywords: Learning Interest, Situational Interest, Individual Interest, Language Learner Factors, Second Language Acquisition

1. Introduction

Educators and researchers have believed that learning interest is an important precondition for learning and cognition to occur [1], which plays a key role in the learning process and outcomes. Since the end of the 19th century, interest has attracted the attention of scholars and educators, though it is only in recent 40 years that researchers in educational psychology have carried out systematic research on learning interest [2]. In the field of second language acquisition and foreign language teaching, learning interest, as an important emotional and motivational factor, has not attracted enough attention. Instead, another similar construct "learning motivation" has been studied extensively in language learning. However, these two terms are not identical. Motivation is more cognitively based and can be used across a variety of subject areas or disciplines. In

contrast, learning interest has both cognitive and affective elements and is usually used for a specific pedagogical subject or field of learning. Given the important role of interest in individual's learning as well as the relatively limited number of research that exclusively examines this factor among language learners, this paper focuses on the sources and influences of situational interest and individual interest, provides an in-depth analysis and review on the studies related to learning interest, with an attempt to introduce learning interest into the practice and research in the field of language teaching, so as to expand the scope of empirical enquiries on this critical factor and to improve both the dynamics and outcome of learning in language classroom.

2. Definitions and Classifications of Learning Interest

Learning interest refers to the individuals' attention and investment in certain specific events and learning contents, including both instantaneous psychological state and long-term sustained tendency or preference [3]. Learning interest is usually divided into two categories [4]: situational interest and individual interest. Situational interest is the immediate, short-lived psychological state caused by the interaction between learners and the external environment and the learning content. The generation of individual interest is usually affected by learners' internal factors, including learners' extant knowledge and intrinsic learning motivation. The differences between the two types of learning interests are also reflected by the different features and functions inherent in them. Situational interest is transient in nature, and it may attract learners' attention, cause pleasant feelings and curiosity for knowledge [5-7]. Individual interest has the characteristics of persistence and stability. It plays its role in maintaining learners' attention for a long time, making them concentrated in the learning process and spending continuous efforts, so that individuals may have tenacious perseverance in the learning process, and in turn, the outcome of their learning and cognitive task performance can be promoted [4, 8]. The main components of the two interests are also different. Individual interests contain more knowledge and value factors than situational interests which is characterized mostly by

emotional factors and reactions [9].

Compared with learning interest, learning motivation is a term more often used in the field of foreign language teaching. Learning motivation is closely related to learning interest, and intrinsic motivation seems to bear much similarity to interest, but these two constructs cannot replace each other. Motivation is different from interest. Some scholars believe that learning interest is specific in subject contents, learning tasks and activities while motivation in learning may cover a variety of disciplines or learning contents [10-14]. For example, a learner may decide to spend all his efforts in learning all the subjects because they like learning. This belongs to learning motivation, but learning interest must be learners' preference for a specific subject or a specific learning content. The types of factors involved in learning interest and learning motivation are also different. Learning interest is a factor that integrates motivation, emotion and cognition, and motivation takes cognition as the core element [15, 8]. In addition, learning interest plays an important role in the occurrence and development of learning motivation. The stimulation of situational interest precedes the development of intrinsic motivation, and individual interest is the prerequisite for the generation of intrinsic motivation [5, 16]. Individuals sometimes do not realize the emergence and existence of learning interest [2], but when individuals have a clear awareness of learning interest, it can be transformed into motivation. Therefore, motivation cannot be regarded as the same concept of learning interests.

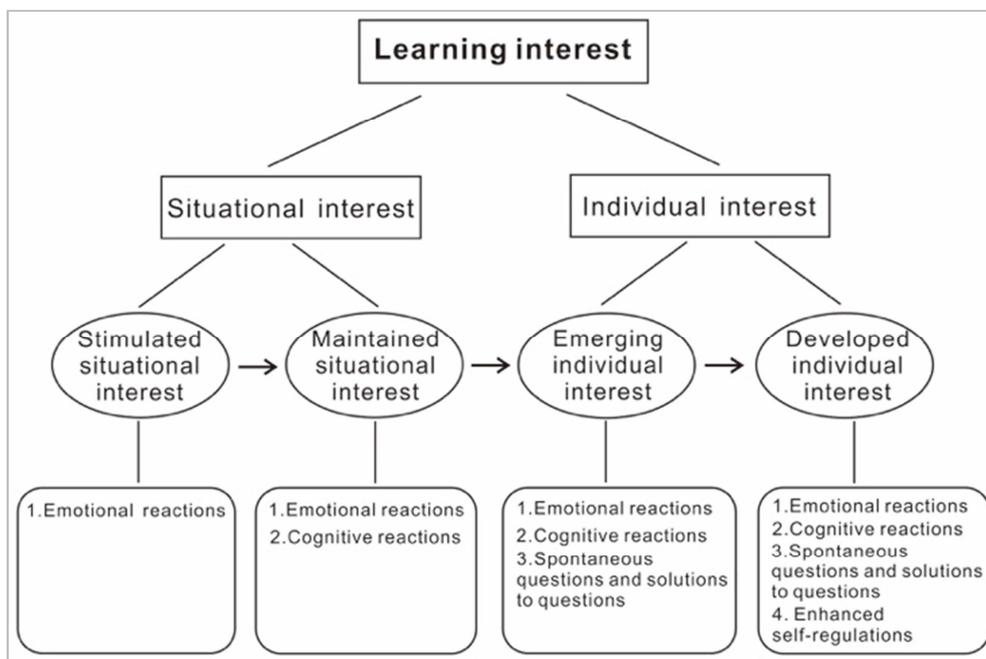


Figure 1. Classifications and processes of learning interest.

3. Models of Learning Interests

The occurrence, development process and essential characteristics of learning interest can be fully reflected by the

four-stage model of learning interest [3]. The model is well accepted and widely used in interest studies. Based on the results of previous research, the authors proposed that the occurrence and development of interest follow certain sequences, with situational interest and individual interest as

the two basic classifications. According to this model, learning interest develops in the following cycle: the stimulation of situational interest - the maintenance of situational interest - the emergence of individual interest - the further development of individual interest (as shown in Figure 1). In recent years, researchers [17] have proposed another model, namely knowledge-deprivation model. The major difference between this model and the above four-stage model is that the four-stage model includes emotional, cognitive and knowledge factors, while the knowledge-deprivation model only involves knowledge factors and does not include emotional factors. In addition, the knowledge-deprivation model is mainly aimed at situational interest, and it is impossible to determine whether it can be applied to the occurrence and development mechanism of individual interest at the same time.

4. Review of Studies on Learning Interest

The research on learning interest started with the source of situational interest in text reading, and then the focus shifted towards the source and influence of situational interest in classroom teaching. However, the research on situational interest and individual interest in foreign language classroom teaching has not been extensively carried out. The following section discusses and analyzes the relevant research on the sources, influencing factors and roles of the two learning interests, so as to provide practical suggestions for the teaching field, especially foreign language teaching practice, and broaden the ideas and directions for relevant research.

4.1. Situational Interest: Not Just a "Flash in the Pan" in Learning

4.1.1. Sources and Influences of Situational Interest in Text Reading

In text reading task, there is an array of the sources of reader's situational interest, including topics, such as the eternal and classical topics; themes, such as narrative themes, can often stimulate more situational interest; and linguistic features of the text such as coherence, vividness, comprehensibility, humor of language style and vivid detail description [18-20].

Situational interest has a positive impact on the effect of text reading in reading activities. The level of readers' situational interest is closely related to the effect of text reading. Compared with the lower-level skills such as general idea recognition, some deeper-level reading measurement indicators such as the quantity and quality of recalling text content, the overall depth of understanding text is more obviously affected by situational interest. In addition, with different text types, the sources of situational interest seem to show different dimensions. For example, the sources that can effectively stimulate situational interest in the reading of illustrative text include the ease of text understanding, text coherence, vividness and attraction [21], while the sources of situational interest in reading literary narrative text include suspense, coherence and thematic complexity [18].

Some researches on text reading interest use the term of "topic interest", which intersects with situational interest, but some researchers believe that topic interest covers two interest components [10, 22] and it refers to the interest of the topic or title of the learned content to the learner and the learner's attention and positive emotional reactions to the content of a subject. In order to obtain more convincing research results, future research should clearly distinguish topic interest from other related interest constructs. It is necessary to clarify whether this interest is the immediate situational interest generated by readers when they are shown the text reading topic, or the individual interest held by readers in the subject field before they start reading the text.

4.1.2. Sources and Influences of Situational Interest in Classroom Teaching

The sources of situational interest in classroom teaching are also diverse, including exploring various sources of situational interest in classroom teaching from different aspects such as content and topic of learning, learner factors and teacher factors. Schraw et al. [19] put forward classroom teaching strategies that can stimulate situational interest, including increasing students' opportunities to independently select learning contents and tasks, selecting reasonably organized and vivid texts, and helping students mobilize and make use of background knowledge related to texts or learning tasks. However, these teaching strategies still focus on the characteristics of teaching materials and texts. At this stage, the research on classroom teaching situational interest is in the stage of theoretical conception, rather than exploring interest sources through empirical research.

In recent years, empirical studies have investigated classroom situational interest in various pedagogical disciplines by using different research methods, and found that the important factors that effectively stimulate classroom situational interest usually include the following aspects: [20, 23-25]

- (1) Features of the course content: mainly including the interestingness of the theme, topic and text of the classroom content, the close connection between the teaching content and real life, and the appropriateness of the difficulty of the teaching material content;
- (2) Styles and structure of teaching, such as teaching practice of encouraging students' participation, promoting students' critical thinking and their independent choice; teachers' socialization with the learners, professional knowledge and skills, and the provision of necessary knowledge scaffolding;
- (3) The nature of tasks and activities in the classroom;
- (4) Students' individual factors, including physiological and psychological factors in learning, students' views on the importance and value of classroom teaching content and theme.

The above factors play a significant motivating role in stimulating situational interest in learners. Among them, the

role of teachers is relatively insufficiently examined in the research of learning interest. In addition to the above-mentioned teacher factors, teachers' personality characteristics, their teaching attitude, as well as their classroom discourse, identity and cognitions in teaching can effectively stimulate classroom situational interest all deserve attention in future research.

From the perspective of learners, other researchers believe that students' awareness of their own knowledge gap is the key factor to generate situational interest [17]. It is found that situational interest level decreases with the increase of knowledge [26]. This conclusion is different from the previous view that there is a positive relationship between situational interest and knowledge growth. At the same time, the researchers attempt to construct the concept of situational interest from the perspective of knowledge deficiency, which is different from the widely accepted four stage model of learning interest development, which focuses on the stimulation maintenance mechanism.

From the traditional research perspective, situational interest emerges instantaneously and lasts for a short time in the learning process, which will not have a lasting effect on learning achievement. However, a trend of relevant research in recent years is to find that the stimulation of situational interest has a great impact on the development of individual interest, and has a significant correlation with the evaluation of individual academic performance and teachers' evaluation of students' classroom participation [24]. In the long term, students' situational interest will affect whether they continue to study the course later, regardless of their initial individual interest in the course [27]. In addition, situational interest can become the necessary basis for the emergence of individual interest [28]. Situational interest can promote learners to participate in the learning of subject content, so as to facilitate the burgeoning of individual interest in the content, which fully shows that there can be transfer between situational interest and individual interest [6]. However, the specific preconditions, key factors and mechanisms of the transfer from situational interest to individual interest need to be further studied and confirmed.

4.2. Individual Interest: The Ultimate Goal of Learning

4.2.1. The Direct Influence of Individual Interest on Academic Achievement

The research on individual interest is relatively fewer in number than that on situational interest. There is no doubt that learners' individual interests have an impact on the learning in various school subjects. There is a high correlation between learning interest and academic performance [16], which directly affects the acquisition of knowledge and skills [29]. In text reading, readers' individual interest in the subject content can affect their depth of text understanding, the use of in-depth text processing strategies and learning experience [30].

The studies not only confirmed the close relationship between individual interest and academic achievement, but

also examined the relationship between different types and different levels of interest and academic achievement. Fully developed individual interests can enable students to devote more attention and efforts to the learning process, hold strong positive emotions for the learning content, and make their learning process easier, so as to promote their learning effect. However, underdeveloped individual interests do not play a significant role in this aspect [12].

4.2.2. Indirect Influence of Individual Interest on Academic Achievement

In addition to exerting a direct impact on academic performance, individual interest can also have an indirect impact on the effectiveness of learning through interaction with other factors. Individual interest is closely related to students' self-regulation which in turn, predicts academic achievement [31]. Some researchers suggest that learning interest factors should be introduced into learners' self-regulation system and regarded as an important motivation factor [32]. Learning interest can be transferred into learning strategies, and the learning outcomes driven by interest may also transfer to other learning contexts [33].

The role of individual interest is also evident in its mediating role in its interactions with situational interest. Using the same situational interest stimulation and maintenance means will have different effects on students who lack individual interest and students who already have strong individual interest. For students with high individual interest, they may not need external stimulation of situational interest for their learning tasks. However, for students with low individual interest, stimulating their situational interest can effectively promote their participation in learning. The means of maintaining situational interest is effective for students with high individual interest, while it has a negative effect on students with low individual interest [34].

4.2.3. Emergence and Development of Individual Interest

Due to the profound influence of individual interest on learning, it is very important to explore the prerequisites and pre-conditions for individual interest to emerge and develop. Individual interest can be generated by changing students' cognitive views on subject content [12]. In addition, learners' views on the value of the content of learning might play a role in the process of changing from situational interest to individual interest and the further development of individual interest [3, 35]. In addition to the above cognitive factors such as learners' goals, their emotional experience and feelings may also be at play in this process [36]. Obtaining positive emotional feedback can develop and maintain individual interest. These views attempt to theoretically construct the sources and critical conditions for the occurrence and development of learners' individual interest, however, related empirical research, especially experimental studies, is few in number. This might be due to the fact that it is quite hard to make interventions and control individual interest, which usually involves a long-term development and accumulation process.

In addition to learners' individual factors, teachers and teaching activities also play a role in promoting the development of students' individual interests. When the learning content is not matched with their extant individual interest, teachers can consider stimulating situational interest into teaching, or appropriately integrating students' existing individual interest into teaching, so as to improve their individual interest in the content area to be learned [12].

4.3. Research on Learning Interest in the Field of Foreign Language Teaching and Second Language Acquisition

In the field of language teaching and second language acquisition, there are few studies focused on learning interest. Most of those studies investigate situational interest in text reading, particularly first-language text reading [37, 38, 18, 19]. To the author's knowledge, there are only a few studies based on classroom teaching in second language or foreign language, mostly focusing on the role and the influencing factors of learning interest in language learning.

Lee and Pulido [31] studied the effects of topic interest on second language vocabulary acquisition and found that when second language students read articles with high topic interest, they have better short-term and long-term effects in incidental vocabulary acquisition.

Researchers also explored the influencing factors of interest in foreign language learning. Chen et al. [39] revealed that the factor of contextual richness is an important factor to stimulate situational interest in writing due to its role in improving novelty and practicability in the writing task. This finding is different from the sources of situational interest in reading task (See 1.1). Therefore, it is necessary to conduct further studies to compare the sources and features of situational interest in different types of tasks and skills in language learning, so as to achieve a relatively comprehensive and correct understanding and conclusion.

Interest in language learning is found to be a dynamic process. There are differences in the sources of stimulating second language learning interest at different stages of learning (such as in primary school, middle school, university or working) [40]. In the classroom, the level of interest of foreign language learners constantly changes, and when the interest level in learning activities is not high, instrumental and targeted strategies can be adopted by learners to regulate and stimulate their own interest [41]. This shows that learners can also play a regulatory role in the development and change of learning interest, but the specific mechanism of learners' self-regulation in interest development has not been examined in depth. In the above two studies, situational interest and individual interest have not been clearly distinguished, which is a shortcoming of learning interest research in language learning.

At present, although there are studies on learning interest in writing, reading and incidental vocabulary acquisition, other language learning tasks, such as oral tasks and activities, explicit vocabulary learning and grammar learning, need to be studied to explore the role and development of learning interest.

5. Implications on Language Teaching and Research

5.1. Summary of Research on Learning Interest

The above review of the research on learning interest in educational psychology, various disciplines and L2 learning, the following issues can be summarized:

1. Studies on situational interest mostly focus on textual features that can stimulate situational interest in reading. The research on learning interest contextualized in classroom is fewer in number, and the related studies in language classroom is even less.
2. Although situational interest lasts for a short time, its role in influencing learning process and learning outcomes cannot be ignored.
3. Compared with the four-stage model of learning interest, the knowledge- deprivation model [17] is not widely used in studies, but it is worth exploring the feasibility and utility of the model in language learning research.
4. The research on situational interest is far more than that on individual interest. Research efforts on the important factor of individual interest are insufficient, especially on the preconditions and mechanism of the transfer from situational interest to individual interest of language learners, and the specific role of language teachers' characteristics and learners' self-regulation in stimulating and developing individual interest in L2 learning.
5. Studies on learning interest in language learning show that the sources and influencing factors of interest in different learning task types tend to be different. However, at present, the relevant research mainly focuses on reading and writing tasks.

5.2. The Future Directions of Interest Research in L2 Learning

In view of the above issues, there are still many areas of learning interest that needs further studies in the field of L2 acquisition. Relevant research can be conducted on the following aspects (but not limited to these aspects).

Firstly, future studies can be contextualized in language classroom to explore various sources and influencing factors of situational interest in language learning, and expand the roles of situational interest through empirical research, such as whether situational interest affects students' participation in classroom activities and task performance, whether it affects the immediate effect of learning in the classroom or short-term memory effect. Knowledge deprivation model of situational interest can be applied by studies to examine the possible influence of learners' awareness of knowledge gap upon the emergence and maintenance of situational interest in the language classroom.

Secondly, longitudinal investigation and experimental methods should be used in the research design of situational interest and individual interest, so as to yield more reliable and persuasive conclusions.

Finally, catering to the specific features of L2 learning, research could be carried out to compare the sources of situational and individual interest of language learners in different types of learning tasks, language skills, different stages and different levels, so as to extensively examine the development of learning interest in L2 learning. In the era of a wide variety of new modes in learning and teaching, future research can also focus on how to fully integrate the triggers of learning interest into the practices of language teaching materials, the design of language learning websites and mobile learning apps. Effective learning which can promote learner's long-term interest in learning the language can facilitate their progress towards the goal of lifelong learning.

5.3. Triggering and Promoting Interest in L2 Teaching Practice

In light of the above review on relevant research in interest factor, in L2 language classroom, we should bear it in mind whether the topic, content and teaching materials can effectively stimulate students' situational interest, that is, whether they are novel and up-to-date, and whether they are close to the reality of students' life. Meanwhile, teachers have to ensure whether the language difficulty is suitable for the current language level of the learners. Making learners come to realize their information gaps in the content of new knowledge may further stimulate their situational interest. Language teachers should also pay attention to their important role in stimulating learners' situational interest. They need to develop flexible and diverse teaching styles, arrange diversified learning tasks and classroom activities, and allow sufficient opportunities for learners to increase their participation in the learning activities and enhance their autonomy in learning.

After the emergence of situational interest, how to maintain, consolidate and develop it into an individual interest that has a more lasting impact on foreign language learning is still inconclusive. However, based on the previous research findings and the theoretical assumptions put forward by the researchers, the author believes that it can be experimented and verified from the following aspects:

1. In terms of students' cognition, teachers can provide appropriate guidance for students to form a correct view and clear understanding of the value and significance of the learning content so as to expand the effectiveness and influence of situational interest by making them realize the usefulness of the learning content.
2. In terms of students' emotion, teachers should pay attention to timely feedback and suggestions on their emotional reactions, self-confidence and self-efficacy in the process of foreign language learning, help them set achievable goals, help them fully aware of their progress and achievements in different phases in the process of language learning, and constantly form positive emotions about learning, so as to continuously enhance their interest and even further transfer their situational interest transfer from situational interest to individual interest.

3. The well-matched extant individual interests of learners with the various topics and contents involved in language learning may also facilitate the successful transfer from stimulated situational interest to the emergence of individual interest. In addition, the multiplicity of teaching styles, along with the friendly and close interpersonal relationship between teachers and students may also play certain roles in further promoting students' interest.

6. Conclusion

The importance of learning interest is widely recognized, but how to stimulate, maintain and develop situational interest and individual interest in the practice of L2 language teaching and learning urgently needs empirical studies to provide satisfactory answers to this question. Compared with another concept similar to learning interest - learning motivation, the research of learning interest in L2 acquisition is far from enough, which needs the full attention of language teaching practitioners and researchers. In addition to the several research directions and suggestions discussed in this paper, there are still many more directions and issues that need to be shed light on in the research domain of L2 acquisition. The results yielded will have a practical and important impact on language teaching practice.

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