

Underachievement and Its Causes in EFL Learning in China's Non-government Universities*

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Abstract—The paper first introduced the origin of academic underachievement and the underachieving phenomenon in China's non-government HEIs. After a discussion of the concept of underachievement, a definition for underachievement in EFL learning is given. Then the paper reviews the relevant theories interpreting the phenomenon of underachievement. At last, the key factors giving rise to students' underachievement in EFL learning are explored under the context of non-government HEIs in mainland China. It is assumed that prior attainment, learning motivation, educational strategy and peers' effect are the four key factors that give rise to students' underachievement in English learning.

Index Terms—underachievement, non-government HEIs, EFL, prior attainment, motivation, peers effect, educational strategy

I. INTRODUCTION

A. *The Problem and Its Origin*

In 1957 during the Cold War, Soviets launched the first satellite Sputnik into space, which astonished American. It left American the impression that their technology was left behind and this made them reflect on their education. It was realized that American's brightest children were not well educated and they were not performing to their potential. This has brought the terminology underachievement into prominence (McCall, 1994; Whitmore, 1980), with research focus on the 'gifted underachievers'. This is viewed as the starting point of underachievement research. The emphasis at that time was to identify the underachieved talents and improve training for the elite. The students as a whole did not benefit and the general education quality did not see much improvement (Ravitch, 1995).

The Civil Rights Act of 1964 outlawed discrimination and ended racial segregation in schools. This has directed the researchers to pay special attention to the underachieving students of ethnic groups, mainly African Americans and Latino Americans. The causing factors and intervention strategies were explored. However the problem of underachieving is a 'hard nut to crack'. Between 1967 and 1982, the gap of SAT scores between the black and white students amounted to one whole standard deviation (Smith, 2005). In the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), achievement gap between African American students and white backgrounds students was still apparent, ranging from 0.6 to over 1.2 standard deviations in some US states (Kane & Staiger, 2003). The problem of underachieving ethnic students remains under researched and unsolved.

No Child Left Behind Act published in 2001 by US Department of Education states that schools should pay due regard to the underachievers, including those from ethnic minority backgrounds, those from economically disadvantaged families, those having limited English proficiency, and those who need special education needs. This Act has guided the research focus from a specific group of children to including all students with underachieving problem regardless of their backgrounds.

In the UK, underachievement has been researched in two facets: the underachieving schools and underachieving individuals. It has been condemned that UK's schools are failing their students. The document 'Worlds Apart?' indicated that schools in England contained a large portion of underachieving pupils, particular in mathematics (Reynolds & Farrell, 1996). Moreover, UK's performance in international comparative tests¹ has been dogged by a 'long tail of underachievement' despite its performance improvement of the more able students (Johnson, 2002). The worst part is that, according to International Adult Literacy survey, 22% of Britons could not read and understand a newspaper article and 23% could not calculate the potential savings offered by a newspaper sale advertisement (Abrams, 2000). As a result, Britain has been criticized for its 'two-track' education system, where the top 10% students perform

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¹ International comparative tests such as the Third International Maths and Science Study (TIMSS) and the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) enable nations to look critically at the achievement of their students in the international arena.

relatively well however the less able underachieve (Reynolds & Farrell, 1996). The research on underachieving schools focuses on reflecting on the pedagogy, education system, education equality and quality, and school effectiveness.

The study on the UK's underachieving individuals has some similarities with the USA in the aspect of ethnic minorities. Students from ethnic groups are more likely to become underachievers. For examples, comparing to their white counterparts, students from black Caribbean backgrounds are almost three times more likely to be excluded from schools in Britain (Crozier, 2005; Smith, 2005); The medical students from ethnic minority backgrounds significantly underachieve in assessments with their white peers (Woolf, Cave, Greenhalgh, & Dacre, 2008; Woolf, Haq, McManus, Higham, & Dacre, 2008). Another perspective on underachievers is the study of gender difference. Considerable evidence shows that boys are underachieving compared with girls (Butt, Weeden, & Wood, 2004; Callanan et al., 2009; Mahony, 1997).

The literature about USA and UK shows that academic underachievement is intensively researched from three perspectives:

First, how can underachievers be identified? Underachievers must be correctly identified in order to give the right students the right intervention. It is best that no underachievers be left out so that every underachiever can receive proper intervention, at the same time non-underachievers mustn't be wrongly included in case wrong intervention be given to wrong students. This involves developing scientific methods to correctly measure underachievement. Underachievers are often identified more in a quantitative way. A student's actual achievement (e.g. school grades) is compared to his/her potential ability (e.g. IQ). If the student's actual achievement is greatly left behind his/her potential ability, the student is identified as an underachiever. This identification is often coupled with teachers' or parents' evaluation.

Second, what are the factors causing underachievement? The causes of underachievement have been researched widely. It may include:

- Lack of motivation;
- Negative peers influence;
- Lack of adequate family support;
- Lack of adequate academic and spiritual support;
- The failing education system/models;
- The stereotype towards certain groups of students;
- Lack of effective learning strategies;
- Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder (ADHD).

Third, what interventions can be given to reverse underachievement? Educators have designed various intervention strategies in their particular fields. Many of them are effective in combating underachievement. These mainly include

- Reforming the improper education system, curriculum and pedagogy;
- Counselling service;
- Academic support service;
- Parents involved intervention;
- Peer-teaching model;
- Clinical practice methods;
- Intervention based on Neurophysiology and psychology;

However it must be noted that generalizability must be dealt with care. A successful strategy may not be successful when applied to somewhere else or on someone else since the underachievers, disciplines and the causing factors may differ substantially. Therefore it is very necessary to reconsider this problem as far as English learning in Chinese non-government universities is concerned.

B. *Non-government HEIs and Its Underachieving Students*

On the global arena, plenty of research on underachievement has been done with the focus on primary and secondary school. Under the context of mass higher education in mainland China, the underachievement in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) has become a problem demanding researchers' attention.

In 1998 Dr Min Tang, an economist submitted the central government a proposal entitled '*An Effective Way to Revitalize the Chinese Economy: Double Enrolment in Higher Education*', which alleges that the HEIs should largely expand their enrolment and charge full education fees from students. This proposal received instant response from the central government in that it could help ease the government's predicament then by 'hitting three birds with one stone'. First, because of the reform of state-owned enterprises during 1992 to 1998, many workers were laid off. Unemployment was a very serious social problem then. Expansion of enrolment would reduce unemployment rate. Second, the Asian Financial Crisis in 1997 brought China's economy into stagnation. Education as a commodity could stimulate consumption and vitalize the economy. Last, by widening higher education (HE) participation, it could enhance the education level of Chinese citizens and accumulate human capital for the country's future development. As a result, The Ministry of Education (MoE) issued the document '*Action Plan to Vitalize Education in the 21st Century*' in 1999. This document proclaims that the HEIs would recruit 6.6 million students and the gross enrolment ratio (GER) would reach 11% in 2000. Comparatively, the GER was 9.76% in 1998 just before mass HE was practiced and 1.55% in 1978 when Gaokao was resumed (Bi & Zhang, 2014). Meanwhile the document also stipulates that various 'social

forces' are encouraged to participate in running HEIs so as to establish an education system of co-existence and co-development of public HEIs and non-government ones. Thereafter on one hand, the public HEIs have increased their recruitment substantially. On the other, the non-government HEIs have witnessed a rapid development. In 2013, there have been 718 non-government HEIs with an entrants of 1,601,879 and an total enrolment of 5,575,218 students (MoE, 2013). The total entrants' number of all HEIs is 6,860,000 in 2013 (YGGK, 2014), which means 23.3% entrants go to non-government HEIs in that year. Non-government HEIs have become an indispensable part of China's higher education.

Non-government HEIs are institutions run by social organizations or individuals other than by government agencies with non-governmental funds (NPC, 2002). Non-government HEIs are not as competitive as its public counterparts in attracting outstanding students. First, they generally have a shorter history and do not have a high profile, so it is assumed that their education quality is not as good as the public ones. Second, they receive no funding from government and they cannot mobilize as much educational resources as their public counterparts, e.g. laboratory building, research projects. Third, because they have to be responsible for their own revenue and expenditure, they charge higher fees, usually as much as three times higher than their public counterparts. As a result, non-government HEIs are usually a second option of students when they fail to meet the requirement of public HEIs.

The statistics indicate that roughly 23% entrants are admitted to non-government HEIs (YGGK, 2014). This ratio roughly represents the bottom 23% entrants in terms of Gaokao score. This indicates that there is a substantial previous academic achievement gap between non-government HEIs entrants and public ones. It is not surprising that underachievement is a much more serious problem at non-government HEIs.

Underachievement is a problem in all disciplines. The current research focuses on the underachievement in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning. Under the background of economic globalization and internationalization of higher education, English proficiency has become a basic skill for college students if they want to compete for a job in the international talent market or further their study in foreign universities. EFL education, i.e. College English has always been an important subject in China's higher education. However, according to the researcher's class observation, informal interview of colleagues and investigation of students' English scores, it is assumed that underachievement in EFL learning has become a serious problem that perplexes both the students and teachers.

What are the key factors causing these students' underachievement in EFL learning? If the factors can be identified, corresponding interventions can be designed to reverse the situation.

II. DEFINING UNDERACHIEVEMENT

A. *The Key Concepts*

The term underachievement could be used to describe an individual student, a school or a nation's whole education system. The current research restricts the connotation within the students with failing academic performance.

Thorndike defines underachievement as 'achievement falling below what would be forecast from our most informed and accurate prediction, based on a team of predicting variables' (1963, p. 19). In Thorndike's definition, the variables mainly refer to parents' education, family background, socio-economic status and gender. This definition is accurate and inclusive. Meanwhile, it is a complex definition with too many variables, which makes measuring underachievement an impossible task. In addition, the variables such as parents' education, family background, socio-economic status and gender are the causes of underachievement, not the underachievement per se. Therefore those variables are often excluded from the definition. Hence the definition for underachievement generally includes two variables, the potential ability and actual achievement. For examples:

Underachievement is usually defined as a discrepancy between potential ability and actual achievement (Dowdall & Colangelo, 1982; Whitmore, 1980).

Underachievers are the students who perform more poorly in school, typically as school grade worse than predicted mental or educational ability. The ability is usually measured by IQ, aptitude, or educational achievement tests (McCall, 1994).

Underachievement is a discrepancy between a child's school performance and some index of the child's ability (Rimm, 1997, p. 18).

Underachievers refer to those who display a strong discrepancy between expected achievement and actual achievement. The expected achievement is usually measured by cognitive or intellectual ability assessments or standardized achievement test, while the actual achievement is often measured by school grades and teacher evaluations (Reis & McCoach, 2000).

These two dimensional potential/achievement definitions clearly describe the phenomenon of underachievement, which give guidance to measuring and identifying underachievers quantitatively. The arising problem is the validity of potential and achievement tests. Since no test is perfect, some students may be wrongly counted as underachievers when they are actually not. Still others may be left out when they actually are underachievers. If a third dimension, teacher's evaluation is included, the students who are statistically wrongly counted in or out could be avoided to a large extent.

The concepts *underachievement* and *low achievement* are often used interchangeably, however it is necessary to distinguish between the students who could have achieved more (*underachievers*) and those who have worked hard to fulfil their potential but have been unable to achieve high academic results (*low achievers*) (Smith, 2005, p. 142). These

students who work hard but are still lagged behind in academic achievement are low achievers, rather than underachievers, because they have used up their potential. As for those students who have the potential to be the best but only get moderate achievement, they are underachievers but not low achievers because their achievement could have been better. Therefore there are generally two kinds of underachievers. Although both have the potential to do better, one kind get moderate achievement and the other kind get very low achievement.

Underachievement has been a widely used terminology in educational discourse, usually referring to a failure to achieve potential. The term also meets its critique. Gillies (2008) argues that underachievement contains a conceptual problem with the concepts of 'achievement' and 'potential'. For one reason, it is difficult to set criteria for these two concepts and the criteria are under constant contest. For another, the connotation of underachievement is problematic. Achievement is a broader concept than attainment in terms of the whole person and the full breadth of his/her life. The connotation of achievement is far beyond school grades. For example, is underachievement a proper label for a student who struggles academically but who is a keen committed musician? Since concerns about underachievement are based on examination grades, Gillies (2008) suggests *low academic attainment* might be a better terminology since attainment is usually limited to the level of academic performance.

As another alternative terminology, *underperformance* is sometimes conflated with underachievement in the education discourse. Actually underperformance is a much bigger concept, which is more often used in the workplace. An employer is labelled as underperformance when he/she fails to fulfil his/her duty or perform it to the required standard.

The current research sticks to the terminology *underachievement*. Underachievement is a well established and widely used term, for one reason. For another, what really matters is not about choice of term, but about how to define the term. As the key concept of current inquiry, the underachievement demands a working definition. An *underachiever in EFL learning* is the student who has a very low actual academic achievement in EFL learning, but has the potential to do better.

B. Identifying Underachievers

Underachievers must be identified correctly before any intervention is given. It is a 'torture' for the students who are wrongly counted in as underachievers, and it is a 'dereliction of duty' of educators if real underachievers are counted out.

A teacher or parent may form an opinion regarding a child's potential ability by observation and then roughly compare their informal assessment with the child's school grades (Shaughnessy, 1990). They might subjectively feel the child could 'do better'. This *nomination method* is the very preliminary way of identifying underachievers. This method is easily influenced by individual bias. Some more rigorous and reliable methods need to be developed to identify the underachievers. Three other statistical methods have been reported in literature to identify underachievers.

Absolute split method is a way to identify underachievers who score higher than a certain minimum (e.g. top 5%) on a measure of mental potential, but score lower than a certain maximum (e.g. bottom 5%) on a measure of academic achievement (Lau & Chan, 2001, p. 188). This method is often used in identifying the gifted underachievers because the students with average mental potential are excluded in the process of selection.

As another alternative, *simple difference score method* can be explained by an equation: the difference score = standardized potential score – standardized achievement score. If a student's difference score is above a certain value (usually one), the student is identified as an underachiever (Carr, Borkowski, & Maxwell, 1991; Lau & Chan, 2001; Nurmi & et al., 1995). Different from absolute split method that focuses only on gifted underachievers, this method can be used to identify underachievers of all kinds.

One function of regression analysis is to explore the relationships between dependent variable and independent variables. Therefore regression analysis can be used to explore the relationship between actual achievement and potential ability. Generally regression of the achievement score on the potential score is calculated, and then the deviation of a specific student's score from the regression line is calculated. The student with marked negative deviation (usually larger than one standard error) will be labelled as an underachiever (Mccall, Evahn, & Kratzer, 1992; Smith, 2005; Thorndike, 1963). This is the third statistical method to identifying underachievers, i.e. *regression method*. This method also covers the underachievers of all kinds, and it has better reliability than single difference method. The weakness of this method is that, by identifying underachievers as those who fall one standard error below the regression line, it will always generate a portion of students as underachievers in any sample (Mccall et al., 1992).

Both the nomination method and the three statistical methods have their strength and limitations. The nomination method is often biased and arbitrary. As for statistical methods, one problem still under contest is the validity of the assessment tools to test potential ability, e.g. IQ. Another problem is the cut-off point for underachievement, which is usually arbitrary.

Underachievement is a multidimensional construct that cannot be assessed by a unidimensional tool (Ford, 1996), so it is suggested that statistical methods and nomination method can be combined to provide a more comprehensive identification approach.

As far as underachievers at universities are concerned, they with no doubt have at least normal intelligence. These underachievers generally have the potential to perform better in their academic achievement. Test their potential abilities will become unnecessary. When identifying underachievers, quantitative methods could be coupled with the teacher's professional evaluation. That is to say, two variables can be used to identify the underachievers, the exam scores and the teacher's assessment.

III. INTERPRETING UNDERACHIEVEMENT

The causes of underachievement are presumably associate with society, culture, family, school and the individual per se. Theories from relevant disciplines are used to interpret this phenomenon.

A. *Theories from the Angle of Sociology*

Capital Deficiency

Underachievement is constantly explored from the angle of family backgrounds. As the embodiment of family backgrounds, capital presents itself in three dimensions: economic capital, cultural capital and social capital (Bourdieu, 1986). Economic capital is directly linked to money and is convertible to two other forms of capital. Cultural capital is the accumulated cultural knowledge (e.g. education, skills, qualifications, etc.) that confers power and status. The children who get hereditary transmission of better cultural capital from their family members have better understanding of education; therefore they are more likely to succeed in their education. Social capital is the aggregate of the actual or potential resources that a person possesses. It is a network of social connections. These three forms of capital are mutually convertible. Having possession of or deficiency of the capital may bring great difference in a person's education in terms of access to better education resources and life planning. Capital deficiency is one important cause resulting in a student's underachievement.

Stereotype Threat

Stereotype is a person's set of thoughts about a social group's characteristics, i.e. traits, behaviours, and roles (McGarty, Yzerbyt, & Spears, 2002; "Stereotypes," 2008). These thoughts may or may not correctly reflect reality. Stereotype threat is a predicament where people are aware of a negative stereotype of their social group and experience anxiety that they may confirm the negative stereotype (Quinn, Kallen, & Spencer, 2010). The experiment by Steele and Aronson proves that stereotype threat can impair the academic achievement of students who belong to negatively stereotyped groups (Steele, 1997; Steele & Aronson, 1995). Their experiment shows that stereotype threat can reduce the performance of African-American student taking SAT reasoning test just because of the stereotype that African-Americans are not as intelligent as their white counterparts.

B. *Theories from the Angle of Psychology*

Peers effect

Peers effect exists when a person's behaviour is affected by his/her interaction with one or more his/her peers (Winston & Zimmerman, 2003). In the education discourse, the relationship between peers effect and academic achievement has been explored profoundly. Students' academic achievement could be influenced by their peers in a negative or a positive way (Burke & Sass, 2013; Gottfried, 2014). Research shows that students who are exposed to unusually low achieving cohorts tend to score lower themselves (Carrell & Hoekstra, 2010; Figlio, 2007; Gorman, 2015; Winston & Zimmerman, 2003). Similarly students who are exposed to high academic achievers tend to perform better academically (Evans & Oswald, 1968; Hoxby, 2000; Vardardottir, 2013). Nevertheless, the existence of peer effects is doubted because there are huge empirical difficulties to measure it.

Achievement motivation

In the context of education, motivation has great effect on students' learning behaviour. Ormrod (2007, pp. 384-386) identifies the effect of motivation from six aspects:

- Direct behaviour toward particular goals;
- Lead to increased effort and energy;
- Increase initiation and persistence in activities;
- Affect cognitive processes;
- Determine which consequences are reinforcing and punishing;
- Enhance performance.

With no doubt, motivation is directly related to academic achievement. The theory of achievement motivation developed by McClelland, denotes that people are motivated by their needs for achievement, power and affiliation, and the theory can be used to predict behaviour and performance (Lussier & Achua, 2007; McClelland, 1958, 1961). Abundant literature has shown that achievement motivation has a strong positive correlation with students' academic achievement, which actually indicates low motivation will predict low academic achievement.

C. *Theories from the angle of Linguistics*

Affective Filter Hypothesis

Affective Filter Hypothesis denotes that some negative emotions, such as, anxiety, low motivation, lack of confidence can become an impediment in second language acquisition. These attitudinal factors show strong relationship with second language achievement. Those students whose attitudes are not optimal for second language acquisition will have a stronger affective filter which is the barrier to language learning. Therefore an effective pedagogy should encourage a low filter (Krashen, 1982). This hypothesis has been explored widely in the context of language education in China. China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI) shows that 146 master theses and 50 papers in key journals have researched this theory's application in language education.

Comprehensible Input Hypothesis

Of Krashen's five hypotheses, Comprehensible Input Hypothesis is the most influential one. This hypothesis claims that a language learner makes progress when the language input is slightly beyond his current language level (1982), i.e. the new knowledge is comprehensible to the learner. According to the hypothesis, if i represents current stage of language competence, a learner moves from stage i to stage $i+1$ by understanding the input containing $i+1$. $+1$ represents the new language knowledge. This hypothesis is widely used as the theoretical basis for textbook compilation, teaching material selection and stratification education, etc.

Based on these two hypotheses, an effective language education pedagogy should provide comprehensible input in a low anxiety situation (Krashen, 1982). Many students attend university with very low English proficiency, which is particular true at non-government HEIs in mainland China. The current teaching syllabus and teaching materials are far beyond their reach and this make them more frustrated. Teaching reform based on these two theories are possible ways to address this problem.

IV. UNDERACHIEVEMENT IN ENGLISH LEARNING IN CHINA

The study of underachievement started in 1980s in China. The first paper on underachievement was published in 1982 by Gao(1982), who introduced Babansky's theory on underachievement. Babansky analyzed underachievement from the perspectives of biology, psychology and education. Babansky and his colleagues explored the causing factors of 3000 underachieving students in Rostov State. Their findings indicated that the factors such as family and health constituted 22% causes of underachievement, and the key factor contributing to underachievement was the defect of education process (Babansky, 2007).

The terminology for underachievement in China is *xueye buliang*, and *xueye di chengjiu* is used alternatively. Searching *xueye buliang/ xueye di chengjiu* for literature from 2012 to 2014 in China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI), 89 results are found, including 32 theses and 57 articles of academic journals.

The underachievement research in recent three years in China have taking on the following trends:

- A number of literature still works on clarifying and defining the key concepts, e.g. underachievement, low achievement, low attainment.
- Research on underachievement's causes and intervention strategies remains hot.
- The research foci have been changed from primary and secondary school students to secondary school and university students.
- The study of underachievement in a specific subject becomes a new trend, e.g. mathematics, Mandarin, English, chemistry, physics.
- Attribution theory is used by many scholars to explore underachievement.

However, if the boundary is narrowed down to the college students' underachievement in EFL learning, not much literature is found. When extended the cut-off year to 2006, seven search results are found, including 5 theses and 2 journal articles.

The literature shows that *attribution theory* is used as an important tool to explore the phenomenon of EFL achievement/underachievement by Chinese scholars. Five of the seven research adopt this theory. Attribution theory is concerned about how people explain the causes of a certain event or behaviour, e.g. what a student attributes his success or failure of a specific subject to. As the founder of attribution theory, Heider (1958) assumes that people are inclined to attribute their behaviour either to personal force (i.e. motivation and ability) or environmental force (i.e. task difficulty and luck) as shown in Figure 1. Based on Heider's work, Weiner designs his own attribution model (Figure 2). Weiner (1974; 1980) argues that causal attribution determines affective reaction to success and failure, and the theory is used to explain the motivation difference between low and high achievers. A high achiever tends to attribute success to ability and effort, and failure to bad luck or poor testing; on the other hand, a low achiever is inclined to doubt own ability and attribute success to luck or other factors beyond control. Both Heider and Weiner believe four factors (i.e. motivation/effort, ability, task difficulty and luck) contribute to achievement/underachievement.

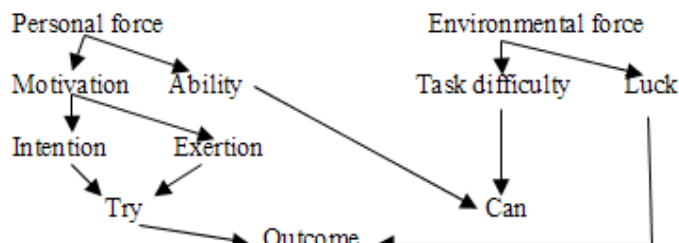


Figure 1, Heider's model of attribution process (1958)

three dimensions	internal		external	
	stable	unstable	stable	unstable
	uncontrollable	controllable	uncontrollable	uncontrollable
four factors	<i>aptitude</i>	<i>effort</i>	<i>Task difficulty</i>	<i>luck</i>

Figure 2 Weiner's attribution model (1974, 2010)

Cui (2007) explores the relationship between the attribution profiles of college students and their EFL academic achievement. The subjects are 124 English majors from a university in Zhengzhou China. They are divided into three groups by TEM-4 scores, i.e. Good Group, Pass Group and Fail Group. The result indicates that effort is the most important factor towards success or failure, and ability is the second. The subjects tend to ascribe both success and failure to effort, which is slightly different from Weiner's findings.

Wang (2009) explores the relationships between self-efficacy, self-attribution and English achievement. Her sample includes 233 students from a Vocational and Technical College in Heilongjiang China. Her results indicate that

- Both high achievers and low achiever attribute success to ability and effort.
- The low achievers have lower self-efficacy.

Ou (2012) studies the influence of achievement motivation and attribution beliefs upon EFL learning. Ou's subjects include 459 college non-English majors from five universities in Xi'an China. The subjects are divided into Strong Learners Group and Poor Learners Group by their CET-4 scores. The results show that

- The Strong Learners has a higher achievement motivation than the Poor Learners.
- Four factors result in Poor Learners' failure in EFL learning, ranked as: effort>ability>situation>luck.

Yuan (2008) studies the causes of male underachievers and the corresponding intervention strategies. This is a case study in a secondary normal school in Suzhou China. The research finds eight factors affecting male underachievement. Ranked according to influence, they are: state of mind, learning environment, interest, goal, effort, study habit, emotion, and learning strategy.

Li (2011) studies the attribution tendencies of EFL learning underachievers. The subjects are 256 non-English majors from a university in Beihai, Guangxi China. The results indicate that the underachievers ascribe their failure in English learning to effort, situation, ability and luck, ranked according to importance.

These empirical research shows that Chinese students generally tend to attribute success/failure to effort and ability no matter they are high or low achievers, which contradicts Weiner's findings. This has further implication that generalization must be dealt with care and it is worthwhile to research a specific group of subjects at a specific context.

The above five research all adopts attribution theory as an important approach to study achievement/underachievement in EFL learning. The following two research studies this problem from other perspectives.

Jia (2008) studies the correlation between goal orientation, learning autonomy and EFL learning achievement. The subjects are 500 non-English majors from two universities in Jinan China. CET4 scores are used as the achievement criterion. The findings indicate that

- A significant positive correlation exists between learning goal orientation and EFL learning achievement.
- A significant positive correlation exists between learning autonomy and EFL learning achievement.

Ma researched (2010) 221 non-English major sophomores from a university in Guangdong. Her result shows that attitude, motivation and learning involvement have a significant positive influence on English academic achievement and learning involvement is the most powerful predictor.

The empirical works both home and abroad have identified numerous factors that may contribute to underachievement in EFL learning. These factors can be categorized into three groups in terms of school education, environmental influence and individual features:

School education: teaching model, teaching contents, teacher's quality, teaching aim, special assistance, learning resources, learning autonomy.

Environment influence: family backgrounds, peer effects, trauma, luck, learning atmosphere, social guidance.

Individual features: prior attainment, learning motivation, interest, learning strategies, perseverance, drive, will, temperament, needs, attitude, emotion, conviction, health, aptitude, effort, being disciplined, gender difference.

Under the context of EFL learning at non-government HEIs in mainland China, the causing factors of underachievement are different from other contexts. With such a large number of factors associate with underachievement, it is impossible to take all the factors into consideration when intervention design is concerned. It is

highly necessary to identify the *key factors* so that it has practical implications for intervention design. Meanwhile, underachieving is a multifaceted phenomenon which cannot be explained with one theory within one discipline. The current inquiry assumes that four factors have exerted great influence upon students' underachievement, i.e., prior attainment, L2 motivation, peer effects and education strategy.

V. FACTORS CAUSING UNDERACHIEVEMENT IN EFL LEARNING

Prior attainment

Students' prior attainment is a significant predictor of their future academic achievement (Broecke, 2008; Engerman & Bailey, 2006; Loretta, Steve, & Stephen, 2009). This indicates that the undergraduates' prior school attainment has a positive correlation to their current academic achievement. The lower high school attainment will predict lower university academic achievement. Prior attainment of English language is no doubt an important factor to consider when researching EFL learning underachievers.

The public universities in mainland China enjoy better reputation and education resources, and charge lower education fees. The key universities of Project 211 and Project 985 all belong to this group. The students with higher Gaokao score generally go to the public universities. Non-government HEIs have to accept the students with lower Gaokao score. It is not surprising that underachievement in non-government HEIs has become a phenomenon which demands special attention. Though the phenomenon of underachievement exists in all subjects, the current research focus on EFL education, which is an important compulsory course for all non-English majors and the problem is observed even worse in this subject. For example, at one non-government university in Zhejiang province, among the 4834 entrants in 2014, the average English score of Gaokao is 97 while the total score is 150. There are 1465 students' (30%) whose English score is under 90 and 176 students' (4%) whose score is under 60. This can predict a large number of low achieving students at this university.

Learning motivation

Abundant literature has shown learning motivation has a significant impact upon L2 achievement/underachievement (Dornyei, 1994; Dörnyei, 2011; R. C. Gardner, 1968; R. C. Gardner, Lalonde, & Moorcroft, 1985; Robert C. Gardner & Lambert, 1972; Guilloteaux & Dornyei, 2008; Weiner, 1974; Weiner, 1980, 1985). Among these scholars, Dornyei grounded his motivation framework in the discourse of L2 learning, which stands as a good reference for researching students' motivation in EFL learning in China. Dornyei (1994) absorbed the motivation theories of Gardner and Schmidt and developed a three level framework of L2 motivation, i.e. *the language level, the learner level, and the learning situation level*.

The language level consists of integrative motive and instrumental motive. Integrative motive concerns a positive disposition toward the L2 language community and the desire to interact with and even be like valued members of the community, while instrumental motive is utilitarian in language learning, for example, to get a better job or to pass a test. At non-government universities in China, students' desire to melt into a community of foreign language and culture, that is, the integrative motive is extremely low. The instrumental motive to learn English, such as to pass CET4 or make one more competitive in job market, is comparatively higher.

The learner level includes the learner's achievement need and self-confidence. The researcher's ten-year observation shows that many underachievers have lost confidence in EFL learning, as a result, they do not bother to try and make efforts to learn. They do have achievement need, but the self-construct of a loser in English learning and this stereotype has pushed them to give up achieving something in this subject.

The learning situation level is made up of course-specific, teacher-specific and group-specific motivational components. Under the context of higher education's massification, students' English proficiency differs greatly even in the same class. The phenomenon of underachievement does exist in each class. However these underachievers have to learn the same materials and be assessed by the same criterion. The materials are designed for the general students, even in favour of top students. The teaching materials are beyond the reach of underachieving students. For various reasons, the teachers can only give very limited special assistance to underachievers. It is no denying that the learning atmosphere at non-government HEIs is not as favourable as their public counterparts. Generally this group of students tend to lose motivation and give themselves up.

Peers effect

In education settings, peers effect refers to that a student's attitudes, values, or behaviours might be affected by interactions with one's peers (Winston & Zimmerman, 2003), therefore the student's academic achievement might be changed as well. Students' achievement is strongly related to the aspirations of the other students in the school. Students of same prior attainment, when put in surroundings of different students' composition, will achieve at quite different levels (Coleman, Campbell, Hobson, & et al. , 1966). College student's academic achievement might be influenced positively or negatively by his peers (Zhang, Yang, Zhang, & Zhu, 2011).

Family plays an important role in primary and secondary school students. Children go to school and back to home on daily basis, so parents influence their children to a larger extent. When stepping into university, students live at campus which is usually far away from their homes. The family's influence begins to decrease and the peers' influence begins to increase since they interact with each other every day. Generally students at non-government universities are not as motivated in learning as their counterparts in key universities, so the negative influence of peers effect is more obvious.

Because of affinity effect, the underachievers in English language learning tend to form a group and develop intimacy with each other. Therefore they could influence each other in a negative way.

EFL educational strategy

The fourth factor concerns the EFL education per se, including the teaching content and pedagogy. The students have learned English since grade three in primary school and it is continued throughout junior and senior high schools. The teaching content is mainly English for General Purpose (EGP). In the university level, especially under the context of economical globalization and internationalization of higher education, the EGP-based language education can't meet the needs of students and arouse their interest. English For specific Purposes (ESP) might be an orientation for teaching reform.

Meanwhile students with different English proficiency are taught in a same class with same textbooks and with same requirements. It is an impossible task for the underachieving students to catch up without receiving special assistance. That is to say, the current EFL education strategy cannot meet the various needs of college students. Both Krashen's Comprehensible Input Hypothesis and Vygotsky's ZPD theory indicate that students make more rapid progress when the input is compatible to the students' current language proficiency and the teacher's scaffolding support is given. This has implication that differentiated language education is another way to deal with the underachieving problem.

Numerous factors may contribute to students' academic underachievement in EFL learning. Under the context of non-government universities in mainland China, these four factors are assumed to be the most critical ones, which have valuable implications for intervention design. It must be noted that these four factors are not isolated but interrelated to each other. The underachievers' poor prior attainment demands reform of current EFL education model, and it to some extent incurs negative peers effect. Meanwhile, the current inappropriate EFL education model may give rise to stronger negative peers effect, and reversely negative peers effect points at the weakness of current education model. Prior attainment, EFL education model and peers effect all directly influence L2 motivation, and vice versa. These four factors, intertwined together, have caused students' underachievement in EFL learning at non-government universities in mainland China.

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