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Article in *Region - Educational Research and Reviews* · October 2025

DOI: 10.32629/rerr.v7i7.4346

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Exploring the intersection of EFL learning motivation and filial piety: a literature review

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Abstract: The global demand for English-proficient workers has increased EFL learning, but motivation issues have emerged, particularly in Eastern cultures where values differ from Western ideals. This study explores how filial piety, a core Eastern value, influences the motivation of Chinese EFL learners. By reviewing six studies from 2015 to 2024 through an integrative literature review, the paper finds that filial piety motivates learners to achieve social recognition and success in language learning. The findings expand on the author's doctoral research at Universiti Malaysia Sarawak, which examines speaking strategies, anxiety, motivation, and attitudes among Chinese undergraduates. This study highlights the importance of cultural factors in shaping language learning motivation, with implications for language policy and EFL research.

Keywords: filial piety; motivation; EFL learning; China; South and Southeast Asia

1 Introduction

English proficiency is increasingly vital for personal and professional success in today's globalized world [1], leading many countries, including China, to incorporate English as a foreign language (EFL) into their education systems. However, learners often struggle with motivation, which negatively impacts their confidence and learning behaviors [2]. Motivation, influenced by psychological and socio-cultural factors, is a key determinant of academic success [3]. In China, motivation is closely linked to collectivist values such as filial piety, which drives many students to learn English out of respect for their parents and societal expectations [4]. Despite its relevance, the role of filial piety in EFL learning motivation remains underexplored. This paper reviews existing literature to investigate how filial piety influences Chinese learners' motivation, particularly in pursuit of social recognition and academic success.

Motivation in language learning is shaped by both intrinsic desires and external socio-cultural influences. It is typically categorized into integrative motivation, aimed at community integration, and instrumental motivation, driven by practical goals like career advancement or social status [5]. Highly motivated learners tend to adopt effective learning strategies, which in turn enhance language proficiency [6]. In China, motivation is strongly influenced by familial and cultural expectations, with academic success seen as a moral duty rather than personal achievement. Filial piety, a core value in Confucianism, emphasizes duty and respect for elders [7], which contrasts with Western individualistic views. This cultural difference may impact Chinese learners' engagement with Western educational content, affecting both

comprehension and motivation. This paper explores how filial piety, as a socio-cultural factor, affects EFL learning motivation among Chinese students.

2 Research methodology

This study adopts Snyder's (2019) integrative literature review framework to explore how filial piety shapes EFL motivation among Chinese and Southeast Asian learners [8]. Amid growing global demand for English proficiency, cultural tensions, especially between Eastern filial values and Western individualism, may hinder motivation. Based on six studies (2015-2024), the review examines filial piety as a motivational factor and its positive or negative impact on learners. Data were sourced through targeted keyword searches, with a focus on culturally relevant insights. As part of a doctoral project at Universiti Malaysia Sarawak, the study highlights the critical role of cultural context in EFL motivation and offers implications for educators and policymakers.

3 Results & discussion

The integrative literature review identifies filial piety as a key factor in motivating EFL learning. Tam found through interviews with South Korean students that filial piety encouraged better academic performance in English-focused classes, influenced by values instilled during childhood [9]. Liu, Wang, and Bai showed that among 727 Chinese students, filial piety motivates fulfilling parental obligations [10]. Peng reported that Chinese learners view filial piety, respect for parents, teachers, and elders, as central to their cultural identity and motivation for success [11]. These findings align with Salili's claim that filial piety has contributed significantly to the rapid development of China and Southeast Asia [3]. Overall, filial piety serves as a strong motivational driver for Chinese EFL learners.

Recent studies indicate that filial piety can sometimes reduce motivation among Chinese EFL learners, especially under the influence of dominant Western perspectives. Filial piety was found not to be a primary motivator, linked to contextual rather than cultural differences in learners' L2-self and ought-to-self [12]. Similarly, the distinction between the desire for language mastery (L2-self) and societal expectations (ought-to-self) has been highlighted. Filial piety was also reported to affect learner participation, with students often relying on teachers [13]. L2-focused classrooms have been suggested to reduce anxiety and boost motivation. Familial and social pressures were found to increase L2 anxiety related to fear of failure [14]. These findings imply that some learners may feel constrained by filial piety or deviate from its principles, contrasting with views that filial piety drives regional growth. Thus, filial piety is not inherently a motivational stressor but can negatively affect motivation due to Western influences and evolving attitudes.

4 Conclusion

This study employed an integrative literature review to explore the role of filial piety in shaping motivation among Chinese EFL learners. The analysis of six studies published between 2015 and 2024 suggests that filial piety primarily fosters instrumental motivation by linking academic achievement to family expectations, social recognition, and career advancement. Most learners view success in English learning as a way to honor parents and teachers. Although some studies note the weakening influence of filial piety due to Western cultural shifts, it remains a significant motivational factor. These findings support the author's doctoral research at Universiti Malaysia Sarawak and highlight the importance of considering cultural values in language education. A key limitation is the small number of available studies on this topic, indicating a need for further research.

Conflicts of interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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