

Motivational Impact of Lecturer-Student Interactions in ESL Contexts Amidst the Shift to Online Learning

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ABSTRACT

As AI and digital tools become increasingly central to education, the role of human interaction in teaching risks being overshadowed, potentially weakening the vital relationships between lecturers and students. In large online classes or efficiency-driven models, technology can inadvertently limit personalized interactions, and without intentional efforts to preserve them, the motivational impact of these relationships may decline in virtual learning environments. To maintain strong, motivational relationships in education, it is essential to integrate learners' insights, ensuring they remain central as the educational landscape evolves. Thus, this study explores the motivational impact of lecturer-student interactions in English as a Second Language (ESL) contexts, based on insights gathered from five in-depth interviews with local undergraduate students. The thematic analysis revealed that students' motivation to learn English was shaped by both encouraging and discouraging interactions with their lecturers. Based on the participants' experiences, supportive and engaging lecturer behaviours increased their motivation. This stresses the critical role of empathy, active communication and personalized attention, in forming a conducive learning environment. The study also discloses the challenges they faced due to unproductive lecturer-student dynamics, demonstrating how such obstacles can reduce students' motivation and hamper their academic performance. Drawing from these perspectives, the study offers practical recommendations for lecturers to improve their interactions with students, ultimately aiming to cultivate a more supportive and motivating ESL learning experience.

Keywords: Student motivation, ESL teaching, lecturer-student interaction, online education, learning environment

INTRODUCTION

The education landscape is evolving due to advancements in artificial intelligence (AI) and digital tools. While these technological innovations have the potential to improve learning efficiency, they often risk overshadowing or undermining the crucial role of meaningful interactions between lecturers and students. A decrease in student motivation and engagement may result from a considerable reduction in customized interactions, particularly in big online classes and efficiency-driven teaching approaches (Yang et al., 2018). Therefore, this study uses insights from local undergraduate students to examine the motivational influence of lecturer-student interactions in English as a Second Language (ESL) environments. By exploring the dynamics of these interactions, the research highlights key elements that promote motivation and enhance academic achievement in an increasingly digital educational environment.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The impact of lecturer-student interactions on student motivation and performance has been well-documented in educational research over the past decades. These interactions allow lecturers to engage with students' emotions, which has been shown to positively influence motivation and learning outcomes (Ballester, 2015; Habash, 2010; Sheybani, 2019). By fostering emotional connections, an often overlooked yet crucial aspect of

learning, lecturers can create an environment where students thrive personally, socially, and academically. Piaget (as cited in McLeod, 1991) states that it is impossible to find a behaviour or a state that is either purely cognitive or affective, without each being involved with the other; emotion has a substantial influence on the students' cognitive processes, perception, attention, learning, memory, reasoning, and problem-solving (Tyng et al., 2017). This underscores the indispensable role of emotional connections in educational settings as emotions can directly influence students' ability to absorb and process information effectively.

These connections foster a supportive learning environment that is conducive to student academic success. The foundation of such interactions is built on personalized attention, effective communication, and empathy, creating a safe learning atmosphere where students are able to engage deeply with the educational content – devoid of unnecessary stress that could compromise their learning experience (Verschuren & Koomen, 2012). Specifically, the extents of closeness and conflict within the teacher-learner interpersonal relationship have been reported to have both positive and negative impacts on learners' academic engagement (Engels et al., 2021; Wan Osman et al., 2021). A study involving ESL postgraduate students highlights that students perceived social distance from their supervisors exacerbates writing anxiety during dissertation writing (Wan Osman et al., 2021). Similarly, foreign language anxiety has been linked to less effective teacher-learner relationships (Goetz et al., 2021). In contrast, fostering a higher-quality interpersonal relationship between teachers and learners can mitigate these negative effects, leading to increased enjoyment and a more positive learning experience (Goetz et al., 2021).

On the other hand, ineffective lecturer-student interactions can have significant negative impacts. Research indicates that a lack of interaction or a misalignment between teaching and learning styles can lead to disengagement and reduced comprehension (Gudu & Jesse, 2023). In online settings, where personal connections are often less emphasized, the risks of diminished motivation and participation are heightened (Munoz & Ramirez, 2015). Furthermore, Yuan (2022) highlights that teachers' communication behaviours, including teacher strokes and rapport, significantly impact learners' grit, suggesting that positive teacher-learner relationships can enhance students' enthusiasm, development of key interpersonal skills, and commitment, while simultaneously reducing anxiety levels. Likewise, when ESL postgraduate students are unable to establish rapport with their supervisors due to consistently receiving negative comments and perceiving an external locus of control, they often experience writing anxiety and emotional distress, and develop low self-esteem, negative self-perceptions, and negative attitudes toward dissertation writing (Wan Osman et al., 2021). Therefore, as institutions increasingly adopt technology-driven models, the need for educators to consciously prioritize personal interactions becomes even more pressing.

Despite the recognized significance of lecturer-student relationships, the current body of literature often lacks direct insights from students themselves regarding their experiences and perceptions (Nyadanu et al., 2014). By providing a more nuanced understanding of how these interactions shape their motivation to learn English, this study seeks to fill that gap by incorporating learners' voices. Hence, the study challenges to answer these questions:

1. How does lecturer-student relationship influence students' motivation in ESL classrooms?
2. How does lecturer-student relationship influence students' academic achievement in ESL classrooms?

In brief, with the intention to promote a more motivating ESL learning experience amidst the increasingly digitalized education landscape, this research aims to highlight practical suggestions for educators based on the insights gained from understanding the different facets of lecturer-student interactions.

METHODS

By means of purposive sampling, five local undergraduate students were selected as research participants. The selection was primarily based on the following criteria: participants had completed a university-required anguish language course, actively engaged in the course activities, achieved high performance (earning an A in the continuous assessment English course), and demonstrated willingness and interest in sharing their learning experiences (see Table 1 for a summary of their profiles). This participant recruitment method ensured the relevance and depth of the findings (Merriam et al., 2016), as information-rich cases allow for a more

comprehensive exploration of the motivational impact of lecturer-student interactions in ESL contexts. The participants came from diverse backgrounds within the selection criteria, representing various engineering majors, genders, age groups, and racial identities, which further enriched the depth and applicability of the data. To uphold ethical research practices, participants were thoroughly briefed on the research details, including their roles, rights, and the purpose of the study, before being presented with the consent form. This ensured they were fully informed and able to make a voluntary decision regarding their participation. Confidentiality was strictly maintained by anonymizing all data, and access to sensitive information was limited to the research team. The consent form clearly outlined the potential risks and benefits of participation, emphasizing that there were no anticipated risks of harm. Participants were also assured that they could withdraw from the study at any time without any negative consequences. This careful approach was implemented to protect participants and ensure their well-being throughout the research process.

Table 1 Brief Profiles of the Research Participants

No .	Participant's Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Major	Completed ESL Course (Grade)
1	Ash	M	23	Computer Engineering	English for Technical Communication (A)
2	Alex	M	25	Computer Engineering	English for Technical Communication (A)
3	Amir	M	21	Electrical Engineering	English for Technical Communication (A)
4	Ayesha	F	22	Electrical Engineering	English for Technical Communication (A)
5	Adam	M	23	Manufacturing Engineering	English for Technical Communication (A)

In-depth interviews were the primary data collection method in this study, allowing for a deeper exploration of the research participants' perspectives and learning experiences in the ESL classrooms. The semi-structured format included open-ended questions that provided participants with the opportunity to share their thoughts, beliefs, emotions, goals, and experiences – elements that were not directly observable. This approach facilitated a comprehensive understanding of how participants viewed and interpreted their interactions with their lecturers (Merriam et al., 2016). Three separate interview sessions were conducted over a span of four weeks, with each session encouraging participants to reflect on and describe their experiences interacting with their lecturers, ensuring rich, detailed data collection. The generated rich verbal data allowed the researcher to understand how participants perceive and relate to their surroundings, uncovering the deeper meanings behind their learning experiences in ESL contexts.

Using a cyclical data analysis approach, the findings were iteratively refined, allowing for a deeper understanding of the research topic (Mackey et al., 2016). The data were first analyzed using open coding to identify initial themes, followed by axial coding to explore relationships between these themes, and then selective coding to refine and consolidate the themes. This process went through two re-coding cycles, with each iteration helping to clarify and strengthen the themes, ensuring consistency and accuracy in the analysis (Mackey et al., 2016). Detailed summaries of each case were then created, and patterns across the interviews were analyzed, allowing for the development of broader insights into the participants' experiences. The cyclical nature of the analysis helped continuously refine the themes and deepen the understanding of the research topic.

FINDINGS

The findings regarding the motivational impact of lecturer-student interactions in ESL contexts are organized thematically for each participant (refer to Table 2), highlighting both common trends and individual variations. Each theme is elaborated upon and examined using quotes from the interviews, with attention given to

how certain themes are consistently present across participants while also exploring the nuances in how different participants emphasize or experience these themes.

Table 2 Summary of Themes

No.	Case	Themes
1	Ash	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Empathy creates a supportive and motivating learning environment • Active communication fosters trust and motivation • Personalized attention addresses student's learning needs • Misalignment between teaching and learning styles reduces engagement and comprehension • Safe and encouraging learning environment boosts academic performance
2	Alex	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Empathy creates a supportive and motivating learning environment • Active communication fosters trust and motivation • Personalized attention addresses student's learning needs • Misalignment between teaching and learning styles reduces engagement and comprehension • Safe and encouraging learning environment boosts academic performance
3	Amir	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Empathy creates a supportive and motivating learning environment • Active communication fosters trust and motivation • Personalized attention addresses student's learning needs • Misalignment between teaching and learning styles reduces engagement and comprehension • Safe and encouraging learning environment boosts academic performance
4	Ayesha	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Supportive and engaging lecturer behaviours boost motivation • Active communication fosters trust and motivation • Personalized attention addresses student's learning needs • Misalignment between teaching and learning styles reduces engagement and comprehension • Safe and encouraging learning environment boosts academic performance
5	Adam	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Supportive and engaging lecturer behaviours boost motivation • Active communication fosters trust and motivation • Misalignment between teaching and learning styles reduces engagement and comprehension

Empathy creates a supportive and motivating learning environment

The findings reveal that the motivational impact of lecturer-student interactions in ESL contexts is closely linked to the presence of empathy, which fosters a supportive and motivating learning environment. Empathy in this context involves actions such as acknowledging students' challenges, offering emotional support, and creating a safe space for learners to take risks without fear of judgment. For instance, Ash and Adam shared the following experiences:

...the support I received from my lecturer, who stood by my side correcting my speech and offering a comforting pat on the back when I stumbled, was incredibly reassuring. This experience alleviated my fears of venturing into unfamiliar territory. Knowing that my lecturer was there to support me even when I made mistakes boosted my confidence and spurred my desire to improve my English skills.

(Ash: line 2-6)

...when the teacher encouraged the students to speak in English despite the students being too shy to do so, by explaining that she was not there to judge or ridicule, but to teach. She told a story of how she was mocked for

her skills when she was learning and how she dealt with it. The students gradually gained the confidence to speak in English and got comfortable doing so in her classes.

(Adam: line 2-5)

In both cases, the lecturers demonstrated empathy through active support and understanding, which helped to reduce the students' anxiety and increase their confidence in using English. Such acts inspire them to accept mistakes as necessary learning catalysts, take academic risks, and continuously improve their language skills. These examples show how empathy can manifest in various ways – whether through direct encouragement, sharing personal stories, or providing emotional reassurance – making it an essential factor in motivating ESL learners. In conclusion, improving ESL student engagement and overall performance requires integrating empathy into every facet of lecturer-student interactions.

Active communication nurtures trust and improves motivation

In addition, active communication is crucial for enhancing the motivational impact of lecturer-student interactions, as it fosters trust and improves motivation. This dynamic process occurs when lecturers aim for mutual understanding by actively listening and engaging with the students, and assertively expressing their thoughts and feelings. Consequently, when students engage in such a transparent communication with their lecturers, they build up trust and thus, feel encouraged to be more actively involved in their own learning. Amir shared his experience communicating with his lecturer *“more frequently in class without overstepping the student-lecturer line”*. This creates a supportive learning atmosphere in which *“both parties can be themselves, especially for the student”* (line 12-14). Such forms of communication not only elucidate expectations, but also clarify feedback by allowing students *“to be more open to share weaknesses in language proficiency”* (Alex: line 15-18).

Also, active communication promotes the exchanged of supportive dialogues between the lecturers and the students. This significantly benefits the students, encouraging them to ask questions and share concerns with ease. For instance, Adam shared in an interview that having a *“good relationship with the lecturer had a major impact”* on his academic success. He claimed that he was able *“to be more open and ask more questions”*, and receive *“answers in a way that she knew I would understand”* (line 6-8). Hence, active communication strengthens the lecturer-student relationship, boosting both student motivation and academic engagement in the ESL classroom.

Personalized attention addresses student's learning needs

The motivational impact of lecturer-student interactions in ESL contexts is further enhanced through personalized attention, which addresses individual students' learning needs. The findings reveal that when lecturers tailor their support to the unique strengths and challenges of each student, it fosters a sense of being understood and valued. In Ayesha's case, she shared that *“some kind words, praise, and support”* from her lecturer made her *“feel validated and motivated to learn more”* (line 46). This individualized approach not only helps to build stronger connections between lecturers and students but also boosts student confidence and engagement. In this case, Ayesha and Amir explained that:

A supportive and understanding lecturer can create a positive learning environment which encourages students to participate actively, which means, even the quiet student like me will join. Students will feel comfortable asking questions, seeking clarification, and expressing their concerns.

(Ayesha: line 12-16)

My memorable interaction is the one I had during the extra speaking class – I had to talk about my idea or opinion on a subject. It expands my views as I can answer truthfully without being constrained or worrying whether my answer is right or wrong. The lecturer also gives views we can comprehend and relate to.

(Amir: line 1-4)

By providing targeted guidance and feedback, personalized attention ensures that students feel more equipped to succeed, thus increasing their motivation and improving academic outcomes in ESL classrooms.

Misalignment between teaching and learning styles reduces engagement and comprehension

However, the motivational impact of lecturer-student interactions in ESL contexts can be negatively affected by a misalignment between teaching and learning styles, which reduces student engagement and comprehension.

The findings suggest that when lecturers' instructional methods do not align with students' preferred learning styles, it creates a disconnect that hampers effective communication and understanding. Consequently, this lack of engagement can hinder students' ability to comprehend and retain information, ultimately impacting their academic performance. Amir and Alex shared that:

I find it hard to adapt with the lecturer's teaching style. I find it hard to understand or join the class if our styles of learning clash. The result is I get left out and left behind, affecting my grade for the class.

(Amir: line 9-11)

...lecturers do not implement natural two-way interactions. This makes most of the students lose focus, or don't understand the lesson completely... the lecturers prefer to just read the textbook verbatim, rather than taking the time to explain... which can help students such as me to relate and understand what's being taught better.

(Alex: line 42-47)

This misalignment often leads to frustration, decreased motivation, and lower participation levels, as students struggle to engage with the material (Ayesha: line 38-40; Ash: line 34-36). Thus, addressing this misalignment is crucial for fostering better engagement and promoting effective learning in ESL classrooms.

Safe and encouraging learning environment boosts academic performance

Accordingly, the motivational impact of lecturer-student interactions in ESL contexts is strongly connected to the presence of a safe and encouraging learning environment, which significantly boosts academic performance. The findings indicate that when students feel secure, supported, and free from fear of judgment, they are more likely to engage actively in their learning. Ash explained that *"the first step in learning English is to speak it without fear of judgment"* and that *"with positive reinforcement and a little help, students can independently improve their language skills"*

(Ash: line 41-45).

This environment fosters a sense of belonging and encourages risk-taking, allowing students to focus on their academic tasks without anxiety. Ayesha mentioned in her interview that her lecturer recognized her effort and continuously encouraged her, stressing that:

Instead of humiliating me, she provided me with comfortable space so I can learn fearlessly and give constructive feedback. This interaction has impacted me so much that she had no idea how her kindness helped me discover myself.

(Ayesha: line 4-7)

Conversely, an unsafe or discouraging environment can lead to increased anxiety, and disengagement, negatively impacting academic performance, as Ash and Ayesha shared in their interviews:

...she often discouraged me by saying that while my spoken English was good, my grammar was at the level of a primary school student. This was a disheartening experience for me... I felt as though all my years of effort to learn English had been wasted. This experience significantly impacted my motivation to learn English...

(Ash: line 28-33)

A judgmental lecturer will lower a student's self-esteem as students may struggle to reach their full potential academically when they always feel they are not enough.

Ultimately, such a supportive environment not only improves students' emotional well-being but also directly contributes to better academic outcomes in ESL classrooms.

DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings of this study underscore the significant impact of lecturer-student interactions on students' motivation and academic achievement in ESL contexts, particularly during the transition to online learning. A crucial insight is the vital role of empathy in cultivating a supportive and motivating learning environment. In ESL contexts, where students often face language barriers and cultural differences, creating a safe space for them to share and express their thoughts and feelings is especially important. As Munoz and Ramirez (2015) suggest, demonstrating empathy and trust leads to significant improvements in student engagement and academic performance, even in virtual settings. Educators must actively acknowledge and address the emotional and academic challenges ESL students encounter. In particular, positive lecturer-student interactions – characterized by respect and empathy – help alleviate anxiety and encourage greater participation. It is essential that lecturers are equipped with the necessary skills to form positive connections with students in virtual environments and address their diverse learning needs. Higher education institutions could organize professional development programs focused on empathy training, such as virtual empathy-building exercises that encourage lecturers to better understand and respond to the emotional needs of ESL learners. These programs could include modules on active listening, strategies for providing emotional support during language struggles, and techniques for creating an inclusive and supportive online classroom environment. Additionally, the programs could emphasize online teaching strategies that balance academic rigor with emotional support, such as using synchronous and asynchronous communication tools to facilitate engagement and feedback, and strategies to encourage participation from shy or anxious second language learners.

In addition to empathy, active communication is another cornerstone of successful lecturer-student relationships, particularly in ESL contexts. Active communication through regular dialogue and clear feedback fosters mutual understanding and a sense of belonging, both of which are crucial for ESL students who may already feel disconnected from the learning environment due to language barriers. As Wan Osman et al. (2021) point out, positive rapport between lecturers and students helps mitigate writing anxiety and fosters independent research skills in ESL contexts. This dynamic process encourages students to seek guidance, thus engaging more actively in their own language learning. Positive relationships with teachers are also associated with increased motivation in ESL learners (Sheybani, 2019), and students who have these positive relationships are more likely to engage passionately in learning a second language. To support this, higher education institutions can provide platforms or channels that facilitate continuous, constructive student feedback on online teaching practices. For ESL students, these platforms should be designed to allow for detailed, culturally sensitive feedback that takes into account their unique challenges in language learning. Institutions could develop digital feedback forms or online forums where ESL students feel comfortable sharing their thoughts on language-related struggles and providing insights on teaching effectiveness. These platforms should be accessible and simple, allowing students to provide real-time feedback on their engagement and the clarity of communication with their lecturers, particularly regarding their understanding of language instruction. This would not only help improve teaching strategies but also foster a more responsive and motivating online learning environment for ESL learners.

Furthermore, the study highlights the importance of recognizing and addressing individual learning needs, as personalized attention significantly impacts student motivation in ESL settings. Tailored online learning experiences, such as individualized feedback and assignments, are especially effective for ESL students, who often face unique challenges related to language proficiency and cultural adaptation. As Gudu and Jesse (2023) advise, personalized attention fosters confidence and independence, while a misalignment between teaching methods and students' learning styles can hinder comprehension and engagement. Educators should apply various instructional strategies to cater to the diverse learning needs of ESL students. In the context of ESL, personalized learning approaches—such as providing individualized feedback on written assignments and

speaking exercises—are particularly important. Tailored assignments that focus on language development, such as adjusting reading materials to students' proficiency levels or using multimedia resources to reinforce vocabulary, can help address each student's unique strengths and challenges. Higher education institutions should also ensure regular evaluation of online teaching methods and the assessment of students' learning preferences through surveys and feedback mechanisms. This could involve tracking students' language progress and adapting instructional practices to ensure that their specific linguistic needs are being met. Institutions could also offer training on differentiated instruction to equip educators with the tools to personalize learning experiences for ESL students effectively. These reflective practices can help identify misalignments and guide adjustments to further enhance student engagement and comprehension in digital environments.

Finally, providing a safe and encouraging learning environment is critical for boosting student motivation and academic performance in ESL contexts. ESL students are more likely to engage actively with course materials, cooperate with peers, and perform well when they feel secure and supported. As Verschuren and Koomen (2012) explain, learners who feel safe can engage in educational tasks without stress. For ESL students, who may experience anxiety or stress when learning in a second language, cultivating a positive and supportive online classroom atmosphere is especially important. A safe environment goes beyond just providing emotional support; it also involves creating an atmosphere where students feel free to make mistakes, ask questions, and express concerns without fear of judgment. ESL students, in particular, benefit from an environment that encourages linguistic risk-taking and fosters the understanding that errors are part of the learning process, not signs of failure. Lecturers can promote this safety by using positive reinforcement, offering constructive feedback, and establishing clear guidelines that encourage respectful and open communication. For example, educators can use forums and discussion boards where students can interact with peers in a low-pressure setting, giving them opportunities to practice language skills and gain confidence in a less formal space. Higher education institutions can support this process by encouraging lecturers to foster a sense of psychological safety in their online classrooms through clear communication of expectations, providing consistent and positive feedback, and using inclusive teaching practices that promote student well-being. This includes creating a supportive virtual space where students feel safe to make mistakes in their language learning journey. By implementing the recommendations from this study, such as providing training on online empathy-building, improving communication strategies, and incorporating personalized learning techniques tailored to the needs of ESL students, educators and higher education institutions can improve lecturer-student interactions, foster motivation, and ultimately enhance academic achievement in online learning environments.

CONCLUSION

As highlighted in the findings of the study, establishing effective lecturer-student interactions is essential, especially amidst the ongoing shift to online learning. These interactions have a significant motivational impact, fostering student engagement and enhancing academic achievement in ESL classrooms. Empathy, active communication, personalized attention, and the alignment of teaching and learning styles are key elements in fostering a supportive, motivating, and inclusive learning environment. By implementing the recommended strategies, educators and higher education institutions can cultivate a more responsive online learning environment, ultimately empowering students to succeed in their L2 learning journeys.

Although the insights provided by this study offer valuable guidance for enhancing the educational experience in an increasingly digitalized landscape, the small sample size of only five participants limits the generalizability of the findings. As noted by Merriam et al. (2016), a larger participant pool would enhance the applicability of the results to broader contexts. Additionally, incorporating the perspectives of instructors or lecturers could provide a more well-rounded understanding of the motivational impact of lecturer-student interactions in ESL contexts. By examining instructors' strategies and practices in online environments, researchers could explore how these influence student engagement and motivation. For future research, a longitudinal study could provide insights into the long-term effects of online lecturer-student interactions, while a mixed-methods approach could yield a more comprehensive view of students' academic experiences.

Expanding the research focus to include students' self-efficacy and self-regulatory skills, especially after completing an academic writing course, could further enrich our understanding. These factors could be measured through self-report questionnaires, observations of students' writing behaviors, and assessments of their ability to set and achieve academic goals, all of which would help clarify how lecturer-student interactions influence motivation and academic success in ESL settings.

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Declaration Statement

The lead author affirms that this manuscript is an honest, accurate, and transparent account of the study being reported; that no important aspects of the study have been omitted; and that any discrepancies from the study as planned (and, if relevant, registered) have been explained

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The lead author has no conflict of interest to declare and there is no financial interest to report.

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