

Investigating the Psychological Insights of Spelling Bee Participation: A Focus on Self-Esteem and Motivation Among Underachievers

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ABSTRACT

Underachievers are often associated with low self-esteem and motivation, especially in joining non-academic activities at their academic institution. This study aims to investigate the psychological insights of spelling bee participation; focusing on self-esteem and motivation among underachievers. A quantitative approach was used to obtain the data; questionnaires. The study used purposive sampling involving 30 pre-diploma students from University Technology MARA (UiTM) Cawangan Johor. The students were required to answer the questionnaires focusing on their self-esteem, intrinsic and extrinsic motivation in relation to their participation in a spelling bee competition. The data were analysed using SPSS: descriptive statistics for mean and frequencies. The findings revealed an average self-esteem among the underachievers for their confidence in spelling bee participation. Meanwhile, the main intrinsic motivation for them to participate in a spelling bee competition are their self-accomplishment and self-pride benefits. Other than that, the underachievers had an average mean score for the external rewards offered by the competition thus explains the extrinsic motivation involved. The findings suggest that more positive psychological approaches to be conducted in elevating the underachievers' self-confidence by highlighting both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation.

Keywords: Underachievers, self-esteem, motivation, pre-diploma students, language-based competition

INTRODUCTION

Exploring the psychological insights of underachievers could be the stepping stone for educators in shaping interesting activities that could be helpful in improving their ESL learning confidence and motivation. A study by Fong et al. (2023), identified that students' motivation and self-regulated learning were the contributing factors for academic underachievement.

Problem Statement

ESL-based competitions have always been celebrated by high achievers, either by teachers' selection or preliminary selection. This practice has significantly blocked the opportunities for the underachievers to participate in those kinds of beneficial activities. Thus, their potential shining moments are also shut off. Pratama (2025) highlighted the increased motivation and confidence in language acquisition among junior high school students based on the opportunities celebrated in a spelling bee competition.

This study focuses on investigating the psychological insights from the underachievers' participation in a spelling bee competition through;

Research Objectives:

1. To measure the underachieving students' confidence in joining a spelling bee competition.

2. To identify the intrinsic and extrinsic motivations of underachieving students in joining a spelling bee competition.

Research Questions:

RQ 1 : Do underachieving students feel confident to join a spelling bee competition?

RQ2 : What are the intrinsic and extrinsic motivations of underachieving students in joining a spelling bee competition?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Language-based Competition

Historically, by the late 1800s, spelling bee competitions were acknowledged as one of the language-based competitions that can help elementary students enhance their spelling, vocabularies and self-confidence (Aras & Hastini, 2023). Rambe (2022) also listed that one of the benefits for students who joined a spelling bee competition was a better improvement in their self-confidence.

Self-esteem

The discussion on self-esteem can be closely aligned to self-efficacy and confidence which all could be elevated through positive psychological approach (Abu Omar et al., 2024). As revealed by Orth and Robins (2022), most of the active, socially engaged and optimistic people are those with high self-esteem.

Self-esteem seems to play a vital role in achieving goals and good grades in academic institutions (Menaka, 2022). In addition, Guban-Caisido (2020), claimed that students with higher self-esteem were more eager to participate in language class and activities.

Motivation Variables: Intrinsic and Extrinsic

Bakar et al. (2023) outlined two segments of motivation, namely intrinsic and extrinsic, in relation to students' motivation and their classroom performance, as explored in their previous study.

According to Benabou and Tirole (2003), as cited in Quesada et al. (2025), extrinsic motivation deals with external rewards such as prizes, recognition, better opportunities and other rewards. In the meantime, intrinsic motivation deals with pure enjoyment and self-satisfaction.

Underachievers

Garcia-Cid et al. (2025) categorized the underachievers as students who did not meet some predetermined goals for a particular age of students which can be seen in their low motivation, low grades, learning challenges and serious absenteeism. This explanation reflects the situation of pre-diploma students in University Technology MARA (UiTM). UiTM pre-diploma students were generally known as the underachievers as most of them were accepted as UiTM students with minimal Malaysian Certificate of Education (Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia-SPM) results; pass for Mathematics, English and History with minimum 3 credits including Bahasa Melayu (Mahdzar et al., 2021).

METHODOLOGY

This is a quantitative study involving a set of questionnaires focusing on self-esteem, and motivation variables of the students in spelling bee participation. The purposive sampling technique was used in the study, as the focus is on the underachieving students; pre-diploma students were selected. The questionnaires were distributed online to the spelling bee participants through Google Form application.

The obtained data were analysed using SPSS; descriptive statistics for mean and frequencies.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

RQ 1 : Do underachieving students feel confident to join a spelling bee competition?

	Strongly Disagree		Disagree		Neutral		Agree		Strongly Agree	
	Count	Row N %	Count	Row N %	Count	Row N %	Count	Row N %	Count	Row N %
I believe I am a good speller	1	3.3%	6	20.0%	15	50.0%	7	23.3%	1	3.3%
I feel proud of my spelling abilities	0	0.0%	6	20.0%	18	60.0%	4	13.3%	2	6.7%
I am confident in my academic skills	1	3.3%	5	16.7%	17	56.7%	4	13.3%	3	10.0%
I believe I can succeed in the spelling bee competition	1	3.3%	5	16.7%	18	60.0%	4	13.3%	2	6.7%
I feel good about myself when I perform well in academic tasks	0	0.0%	3	10.0%	14	46.7%	6	20.0%	7	23.3%
I am not afraid to make mistakes while learning new words	0	0.0%	4	13.3%	13	43.3%	3	10.0%	10	33.3%
I believe I deserve to succeed in the spelling bee	0	0.0%	5	16.7%	15	50.0%	5	16.7%	5	16.7%
I feel supported by my teachers and peers in my academic endeavours.	0	0.0%	4	13.3%	7	23.3%	11	36.7%	8	26.7%
I am willing to take on challenges to improve my skills	0	0.0%	4	13.3%	8	26.7%	12	40.0%	6	20.0%
I believe that participating in the spelling bee will help me grow as a student	0	0.0%	3	10.0%	9	30.0%	7	23.3%	11	36.7%

Figure 1 The percentage of the frequency: the underachievers' confidence in joining a spelling bee competition.

Based on Figure 1, Q1 to Q7 which cater to students' confidence in academic skills and participating in the spelling bee competition, most of the students rated neutral with 40% and above for each statement. In addition, referring to Figure 2, since the overall mean score is at 3.57 and below (range 1 to 5; strongly disagree to strongly agree) for the mentioned statements, the neutral responses were clearly proven.

Statistics											
		I believe I am a good speller	I feel proud of my spelling abilities	I am confident in my academic skills	I believe I can succeed in the spelling bee competition	I feel good about myself when I perform well in academic tasks	I am not afraid to make mistakes while learning new words	I believe I deserve to succeed in the spelling bee	I feel supported by my teachers and peers in my academic endeavours.	I am willing to take on challenges to improve my skills	I believe that participating in the spelling bee will help me grow as a student
N	Valid	30	30	30	30	30	30	30	30	30	30
	Missing	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Mean		3.03	3.07	3.10	3.03	3.57	3.63	3.33	3.77	3.67	3.87
Std. Deviation		.850	.785	.923	.850	.971	1.098	.959	1.006	.959	1.042
Minimum		1	2	1	1	2	2	2	2	2	2
Maximum		5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5

Figure 2 The mean frequency of the underachievers' confidence in joining a spelling bee competition.

However, as displayed in Figure 2 for Q8 to Q10, majority of the students rated 60% and above for agree and strongly agree on their confidence in getting supports from teachers and peers for the spelling bee challenge and benefits they can gain from it. Likewise, the overall mean score for the three statements is at 3.77 and above (range 1 to 5; strongly disagree to strongly agree) clearly revealed the high confidence score.

RQ2 : What are the intrinsic and extrinsic motivations of underachieving students in joining a spelling bee competition?

	Strongly Disagree		Disagree		Neutral		Agree		Strongly Agree	
	Count	Row N %	Count	Row N %	Count	Row N %	Count	Row N %	Count	Row N %
I enjoy learning new words for the spelling bee competition	0	0.0%	4	13.3%	7	23.3%	7	23.3%	12	40.0%
Participating in the spelling bee gives me a sense of personal accomplishment	0	0.0%	4	13.3%	11	36.7%	6	20.0%	9	30.0%
I find the process of preparing for the spelling bee to be interesting	0	0.0%	3	10.0%	10	33.3%	10	33.3%	7	23.3%
I feel proud of myself when I successfully spell a challenging word	0	0.0%	3	10.0%	9	30.0%	6	20.0%	12	40.0%
I am curious about the meanings and origins of the words I learn for the competition	0	0.0%	6	20.0%	8	26.7%	7	23.3%	9	30.0%

Figure 3 The percentage of the frequency: the underachievers' intrinsic motivation in joining a spelling bee competition.

As shown in Figure 3, the frequency distribution for the students' intrinsic motivation were most scored by Q1 (I enjoy learning new words for the spelling bee competition) and Q4 (I feel proud of myself when I successfully spelled a challenging word) with 60% and above for agree and strongly agree.

Statistics						
		I enjoy learning new words for the spelling bee competition	Participating in the spelling bee gives me a sense of personal accomplishment	I find the process of preparing for the spelling bee to be interesting	I feel proud of myself when I successfully spell a challenging word	I am curious about the meanings and origins of the words I learn for the competition
N	Valid	30	30	30	30	30
	Missing	0	0	0	0	0
Mean		3.90	3.67	3.70	3.90	3.63
Std. Deviation		1.094	1.061	.952	1.062	1.129
Minimum		2	2	2	2	2
Maximum		5	5	5	5	5

Figure 4 The mean frequency of the underachievers' intrinsic motivation in joining a spelling bee competition.

Based on Figure 4, the mean frequency recorded for both Q1 and Q4 is 3.9 (range 1 to 5; strongly disagree to strongly agree) suggested a high score for the intrinsic motivation.

	Strongly Disagree		Disagree		Neutral		Agree		Strongly Agree	
	Count	Row N %	Count	Row N %	Count	Row N %	Count	Row N %	Count	Row N %
I am participating in the spelling bee to win a prize	3	10.0%	4	13.3%	17	56.7%	2	6.7%	4	13.3%
I want to impress my teachers and parents by performing well in the competition	0	0.0%	3	10.0%	15	50.0%	4	13.3%	8	26.7%
I believe doing well in the spelling bee will earn me recognition from others	0	0.0%	6	20.0%	15	50.0%	3	10.0%	6	20.0%
I am preparing for the spelling bee to avoid disappointing my family	3	10.0%	4	13.3%	12	40.0%	6	20.0%	5	16.7%
Winning the spelling bee is important to me because of the external rewards associated with it	1	3.3%	4	13.3%	16	53.3%	6	20.0%	3	10.0%

Figure 5 The percentage of the frequency: the underachievers' extrinsic motivation in joining a spelling bee competition.

Figure 5 listed the frequency distribution for the extrinsic motivation rated by the underachievers scored more on neutral with 40% and above for all Q1 to Q5.

Statistics						
		I am participating in the spelling bee to win a prize	I want to impress my teachers and parents by performing well in the competition	I believe doing well in the spelling bee will earn me recognition from others	I am preparing for the spelling bee to avoid disappointing my family	Winning the spelling bee is important to me because of the external rewards associated with it
N	Valid	30	30	30	30	30
	Missing	0	0	0	0	0
Mean		3.00	3.57	3.30	3.20	3.20
Std. Deviation		1.083	1.006	1.022	1.186	.925
Minimum		1	2	2	1	1
Maximum		5	5	5	5	5

Figure 6 The mean frequency of the underachievers' extrinsic motivation in joining a spelling bee competition.

The neutral response for the extrinsic motivation can also be understood by the overall mean score 3.57 and below (range 1 to 5; strongly disagree to strongly agree) as shown in Figure 6.

CONCLUSION

The underachievers' self-esteem in joining a spelling bee competition was proven to be at the average level as revealed in the study. They were not really confident in their English proficiency thus hinder their assurance in succeeding the spelling bee competition. The results are supported by a research by Rai (2023), as the findings

presented the low achievers admitted to having low self-confidence due to their fear of making mistakes when joining language activities.

However, their belief in their teachers' and peers' moral support was scored at a high level in the scale. This suggests their optimism in improving their language proficiency by taking up the challenge in a spelling bee competition. This is consistent with a study by Holland (2024) which displayed a very positive impact caused by parents' involvement and support to underachievers' confidence in their ability.

Following the findings, instructors can expose students to various language-based competitions to help them polish their language skills and build their confidence. As suggested by Tantawy (2021), instructors should be more proactive in reviewing their long-standing teaching practices and opening new windows for exploration to suit the students' need especially the underachievers.

As for the intrinsic motivation, majority of the underachievers agreed that self-satisfaction and pure enjoyment from the competition that motivate them to be the participants. In other words, their personal accomplishment when taking up the challenge even before winning the competition has already fulfilled their self-pride. This finding can be a good comparison to a study by Ginting (2021) which translated the possibility of the extrinsic motivation to be transformed into the intrinsic motivation; for instance, participants who initially competed for prizes could also get the satisfaction from constructive feedbacks and pure enjoyment.

Unexpectedly, majority of the underachievers were not really motivated by the extrinsic factors in joining the spelling bee competition. They were being neutral over the external rewards listed in the statements. In addition, external recognition from others plays a minor role in motivating them to be the spelling bee participants. On the contrary, findings from Liu (2020), revealed that students with lower mastery of English were motivated by the extrinsic factors compared to the higher achievers for their participation intention in a language-based competition.

In conclusion, the underachievers' self-esteem can be improved with a proper exposure from the instructors and peers. Other than that, intrinsic motivation seems to play a major role in motivating the underachievers to be the participants in a language-based competition.

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