Exploring ESL Learners' Motivation through Self-Determination Theory in an International School Setting

Divithaa Muralei*, Nur Ehsan Mohd Said

Faculty of Education, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, Bangi, Malaysia

***Corresponding Author**

ABSTRACT

Motivation plays a crucial role in English as a Second Language (ESL) learning, particularly in international school contexts where learners are exposed to diverse linguistic, cultural, and academic demands. This qualitative study examines ESL learners' motivation in an international school setting through the framework of Self-Determination Theory, focusing on how the psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness influence their motivation, and how classroom practices and the school environment facilitate or constrain their engagement. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with seven lower secondary students in an international school. The data were analysed thematically using a systematic coding process supported by qualitative analysis software. The analysis focused on identifying patterns related to students' motivational orientations, psychological needs, and classroom experiences. The findings indicate that students' motivation was predominantly intrinsic, driven by enjoyment, communication, and personal growth. Extrinsic factors, such as academic achievement and future goals, were also present. Among the three psychological needs, competence emerged as the most influential, as teacher feedback, progress recognition, and clear guidance strengthened students' confidence and participation. Autonomy-supported motivation when learning choices were structured, whereas excessive or unclear freedom led to confusion and reduced engagement. Relatedness showed mixed effects, with supportive peer and teacher relationships encouraging participation, while negative peer dynamics lowered motivation. Classroom practices and the school environment played a significant role in shaping motivation. Interactive, creative, and visually supported activities promoted engagement, whereas repetitive tasks, limited instructional support, disruptive peers, and academic pressure hindered motivation. Overall, the findings suggest that ESL learners' motivation is dynamic, highlighting the importance of supportive classroom practices and learning environments in sustaining motivation in international school ESL contexts.

Keywords: Motivation, Self-Determination Theory**,** Classroom practices, international school context, ESL

INTRODUCTION

This study aims to synthesise existing research on the motivation of young ESL learners, highlighting the relevance of Self-Determination Theory in understanding their learning experiences. The findings will explore how autonomy, competence, and relatedness influence motivation and engagement among these learners, providing educators with insights for adapting their teaching practices.

Research indicates that various types of motivation, including instrumental, integrative, and intrinsic, contribute to language learning success (Azar & Tanggaraju, 2020; Wallace & Leong, 2020). Many factors influence motivation and learning outcomes and enhance them. Factors such as positive teacher relationships, engaging classroom activities, and digital environments can enhance motivation and learning outcomes (Wallace & Leong, 2020). Understanding these motivational factors is essential for educators to create effective learning environments that foster language acquisition and support young ESL learners in achieving their goals.

Self-determination theory, also known as SDT, is a framework used for the understanding of human motivation, specifically on what motivates them intrinsically and extrinsically. According to Alamer (2021), tools based on Self-Determination Theory have been proven effective for measuring second language learning motivation. SDT provides a framework for designing motivating educational experiences and interventions (Guay, 2021). The application of SDT in educational contexts highlights the significance of creating environments that nurture learners' intrinsic motivation, ultimately leading to improved language acquisition outcomes.

There are a few aspects to be studied, which will include the key factors that influence learning motivation among young ESL learners. The internal and external drivers will be explored, and the three roles of Self-determination Theory SDT (autonomy, competence, and relatedness) will be reviewed. The institutional and pedagogical factors and how they affect the motivational experiences will be discussed. Understanding learners' motivation allows enhanced language learning processes (Dincer et al. 2019). However, key questions remain:

1. How do ESL learners in an international school describe their motivation to learn English?

2. How do psychological needs (autonomy, competence, and relatedness) and classroom practices influence ESL learners' motivation in an international school context?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theme 1: Motivation in ESL Learning

Students' intrinsic motivation is students being able to join and engage in the activities of their own will (Ryan & Deci, 2020). They are motivated by being dependent on a source that can influence them to include themselves in the task and learn. Extrinsic motivation, however, refers to the attitude of learners driven by external factors rather than their own internal drive. According to Ryan & Deci (2020), external motivation can be regulated by imposing the right stimulation and incentive. Understanding students' motivation has a significant impact on their engagement. In a study by Oga-Baldwin and Nakata (2017), it was found that engagement is primarily linked to self-determined forms of motivation, such as intrinsic motivation and identified regulation, rather than externally controlled motives.

Recent studies suggest that motivation in ESL learning is not consistent and unchanging, but rather shaped by ongoing classroom experiences and social interactions (Kashefian-Naeeini et al., 2024). Learners' motivation can strengthen or decline depending on how instructional practices, feedback, and peer relationships support their psychological needs, highlighting the importance of context in sustaining engagement over time (Howard et al., 2021).

Individual interests are not the only factors that affect motivation in ESL courses; instruction, cultural background, and how competent and supported students feel are also important factors (Noels et al., 2019). Understanding the interplay between these motivational drivers can help educators create a more personalised and effective learning environment, ultimately enhancing student outcomes in language acquisition (Hennebry-Leung & Hu, 2020). In summary, a balanced approach that nurtures both intrinsic and extrinsic motivations is essential for fostering a positive and effective language learning environment.

These diverse elements show that motivation is influenced by more than just learner characteristics; it can also be significantly affected by how students feel about their teachers, their classroom, and their level of competence. Self-Determination Theory (SDT) is applied in this work to gain a deeper understanding of these motivational dynamics.

Theme 2: Self-Determination Theory and Classroom Practices in International School Contexts

According to Deci et al. (2017), self-determination theory is a comprehensive framework with three main foci: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. It is a macro theory that constructs human motivation intrinsically and extrinsically.

In the context of learning a language, autonomy is frequently understood to be the capacity of learners to direct their own education. This entails deciding how they will learn, thinking critically, and acting on their initiative according to their preferences, abilities, and independence (Alrabai, 2021). Competence is the feeling of being capable and effective in one's learning endeavours, and relatedness refers to the ability to make connections and interact with people (Dincer et al., 2019). Perceived competence is an effective indicator of intrinsic motivation and involvement in language learning, according to multiple studies (Dincer et al., 2019).

Research demonstrates that autonomy-supportive teaching methods, which emphasise student choice, less pressure, and high instructor responsiveness, are essential for promoting intrinsic motivation and student ownership of the educational process. Alrabai (2021) demonstrated that when teachers used autonomy-supportive methods, learners' autonomy and competence increased significantly, with perceived choice serving as a crucial mediator. Likewise, it was found that these instructional strategies enhanced students' intrinsic motivation and involvement in secondary language classes (Han, 2021; Ryan & Deci, 2017).

In a study by Wei (2025), it was found that social interest and teacher praise increase students' sense of belonging, and autonomy is associated with personal enjoyment. Together, these factors contribute to a more supportive and motivating learning environment. The three psychological aspects are interrelated. In a study by Hsu et al. (2019), students are not naturally more motivated when they feel connected to others and free. Rather, these emotions provide students a sense of increased competence and capability, and it is this confidence that increases their drive.

The need for autonomy typically develops during adolescence, marking a developmental change towards increased independence and self-direction. Learners' motivation tends to change as learners become older or change in education level (Beyers et al., 2024). This is because students are more likely to interact and grow in settings that recognise their independent thinking and offer real possibilities for choice and self-regulation. This increased desire for autonomy has major implications for educational settings. This serves as a reason to place importance on the need for autonomy-supporting techniques in the secondary classrooms. This is to ensure students have increased autonomy with better adapted support as seems relevant (Guay, 2021).

While relatedness is recognised as an important component of supportive learning environments, research has tended to emphasise autonomy and competence support more strongly (Prananto et al., 2025). Perceived competence is also connected to the relationship between teachers and students. Good relationships between teachers and students are highlighted as a type of relatedness that raises engagement and motivation (Prananto et al., 2025). Relatedness has also been shown to lower anxiety and boost intrinsic motivation, especially in situations where students are encouraged to form friendships (Wei, 2025). The interdependence of autonomy, competence, and relatedness highlights the significance of an overall approach for motivating ESL students, which will ultimately result in improved educational experiences.

Although the research emphasises the significance of responding to all three needs, some studies indicate that autonomy frequently receives more focus, possibly as a result of its direct connection to intrinsic motivation (Wang et al., 2024). However, research is supporting a balanced strategy to provide all three requirements at once, highlighting the increasing recognition of these needs' interdependence (Wei, 2025).

By recognising the psychological needs for autonomy, competence and relatedness described in Self-Determination Theory, educators can design classroom environments that foster a genuine care for learning rather than mere compliance (Howard et al., 2021).

A study by Granberg et al. (2021) shows that by encouraging students' self-efficacy and autonomy, formative assessment techniques like feedback and self-evaluation greatly support self-regulated learning. This aligns with the SDT needs, where formative assessments can support the competence level in students and with positive feedback given from the assessment (Pat-El et al., 2024). Not only that, but the assessment also supports autonomy in students. A study by Nikou & Economides (2021) explored more towards SDT and mobile technology-based assessments. It was found that the framework aligns with mobile-based assessments. It was reported that students achieve high autonomy through the learning activities that incorporate mobile devices. Moreover, feedback from the tutor and online interactions increase the level of perceived competence

and relatedness. This further shows the relevance of the self-determination theory with current learning practices and how it complements the aspects of autonomy, competence, and relatedness.

Because of their distinct learning environments, varied student bodies, and the interaction of local and global educational influences, international schools are not like national or local ones in terms of motivation (McKeering et al., 2021). These differences influence the motivational types and the classroom practices, as well as the instructional strategies carried out for the lessons.

Tab & Sabuncuoğlu (2022) conducted a study on students' perceptions of the factors that motivate international school students. It was found that students are mostly motivated because of the teachers' friendliness and enthusiasm. Looking into the self-determination framework, learners' motivational drive is affected by relatedness, where the teachers' personality made them more engaged and involved in the lesson. In the previous studies, most students from other schools are more towards autonomy-based motivation. This indicates that motivational orientations within the SDT framework may vary across educational contexts, and it is crucial to understand the motivation.

Teachers can enhance autonomy by creating a classroom environment that encourages exploration and self-expression, which is crucial for language acquisition (Cotterall & Murray, 2024). Recent SDT-based research further suggests that autonomy-supportive teaching practices are closely associated with higher levels of autonomous motivation and perceived competence among students (Ryan & Deci, 2020; Jeno et al., 2021). Importantly, perceived competence has been shown to play a particularly central role in academic functioning, sometimes exerting a stronger influence on learning outcomes than motivation alone. This highlights the importance of structured feedback, clarity, and supportive instructional design in sustaining learner motivation, especially in structured educational settings.
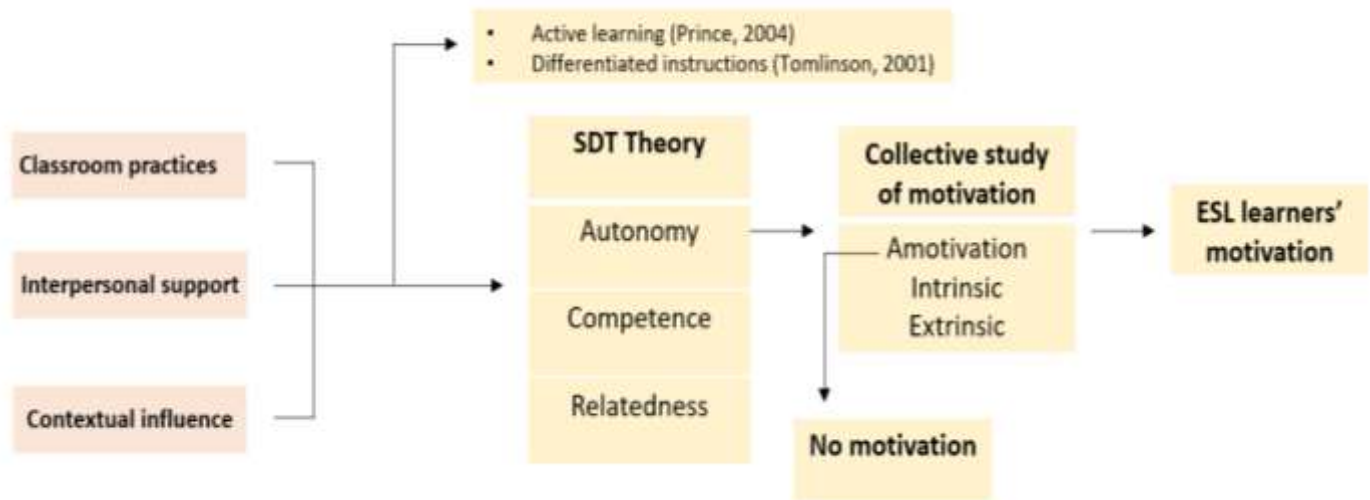
GAPS IN THE LITERATURE

Many SDT studies utilise the quantitative method, especially cross-sectional data collected through questionnaire surveys (Azar, A.S., & Tanggaraju, D, 2020; Alamer, A, 2021; Guay, F, 2021). Moreover, measurement accuracy may be affected when participants misinterpret or respond superficially to abstract or fixed survey items, which can limit the validity of quantitative instruments. In contrast, qualitative interviews allow for flexibility in questioning, clarification of responses, and follow-up questions, enabling researchers to refine questions during the data collection process and obtain more accurate and meaningful insights into participants' experiences (Lim, 2024).

Although a lot of research has looked at motivation using standardised frameworks, it frequently ignores the contextual and cultural elements that affect how students feel motivated in actual classroom settings. In varied learning environments, where cultural norms influence how autonomy, competence, and relatedness are understood and demonstrated, they are usually not included. According to Ryan and Deci (2020), motivation is not always felt in the same way in different situations, and successfully implementing Self-Determination Theory is crucial, as many studies have shown the influence of this theory in diverse cultural contexts and how it facilitates motivation. There are also fewer studies on the international school context as compared to other schools, as reviewed, and this will be considered as the gap for the research.

Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

Figure 1: SDT-Based Framework for ESL Learners' Motivation

This study is guided by a conceptual framework grounded in Self-Determination Theory (SDT) (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci 2020) and supported by two instructional approaches practised in the school context: active learning (Prince, 2004) and differentiated instruction (Tomlinson, 2001). The framework also considers classroom practices, interpersonal support, and contextual influences as key factors shaping learners' motivation.

Active learning promotes students' sense of autonomy by offering meaningful choices and varied activity types, such as discussions, games, presentations, and debates. These practices encourage active participation and allow learners to take ownership of their learning process (Prince, 2004; Rezai et al., 2025). Differentiated instruction further supports learners by addressing differences in ability, interest, and preparedness, thereby enhancing students' perceived competence and fostering relatedness through inclusive and responsive teaching practices (Tomlinson, 2001; Langelaan et al., 2024).

Classroom practices, interpersonal support and contextual influences support learners' autonomy, competence, and relatedness. When these SDT needs are met, ESL learners are more likely to develop intrinsic or positive extrinsic motivation; when they are unmet, a motivation may occur. Together, these factors shape learners' motivation and influence their engagement and learning outcomes.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This qualitative study employed a qualitative thematic analysis to explore ESL learners' motivation to learn English in an international school setting. Focusing on subjective meaning-making, the qualitative design facilitated an in-depth examination of ESL learners' experience and motivation at school. The motivation level and the elements surrounding that could be studied thoroughly (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Seven volunteers between the ages of 13 and 15 were chosen at random to guarantee a variety of significant perspectives. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to capture students' lived experiences and motivational perceptions, guided by Self-Determination Theory (SDT), focusing on autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

Research Instrument

The interview protocol, adapted from Dincer et al. (2019) and Kim (2006). Selected questions were adapted and modified to suit the research context and participants, rather than being adopted in full. The interview

consisted of semi-structured questions designed to explore students' motivation, psychological need satisfaction (autonomy, competence, and relatedness), and classroom experiences in English learning. The protocol was validated by a senior TESL lecturer and pilot tested with one participant to assess clarity, relevance, and engagement. Minor wording revisions were made based on the feedback. Ethical approval was obtained from the school, and informed consent was secured from both students and parents before data collection.

Data Analysis

Interview data were transcribed and analysed thematically following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework. This approach was chosen for its flexibility in identifying patterns related to learners' motivation and classroom experiences within a Self-Determination Theory (SDT) perspective.

All interviews were transcribed verbatim and read repeatedly to achieve data familiarisation. Manual coding was conducted first to maintain close engagement with the data. Meaningful excerpts were labelled using descriptive and theory-informed codes related to the research questions.

In a second coding cycle, transcripts were uploaded to ATLAS.ti to organise and visualise the data systematically. The manually generated codes were recreated within the software and cross-checked for consistency. Any discrepancies between manual and software-assisted coding were resolved by cross-checking the original transcripts. Overlapping codes were merged, unclear codes were refined, and redundant labels were removed to ensure analytical coherence.

Codes were then grouped into broader categories and refined into themes aligned directly with the three research questions. For example, codes related to feedback, praise, and progress were grouped under competence support, while codes related to choice and creativity were categorised as autonomy support.

To enhance trustworthiness, member checking was conducted to verify the accuracy of interpretations, and teacher feedback was used for data triangulation. Finally, themes were interpreted in relation to SDT to explain how classroom experiences supported or hindered learners' motivation.

FINDINGS

Overview of Findings

Analysis of the interviews revealed patterns related to learners' motivation, psychological need satisfaction, and classroom practices.

How do ESL learners in an international school describe their motivation to learn English?

Analysis of the interview data indicated that many students described intrinsic reasons for learning English. Many students described enjoying English because it is a fun, engaging subject that provides opportunities for self-expression. For example, "English is one of my favourite subjects… I can express myself". Intrinsic motivation was also evident in students' desire to use English for real-life communication. This is found in statements such as "I want to talk to more people… internationally".

Learners frequently highlighted the impact of interactive classroom activities, including debates, presentations, and games. These tasks were described as enjoyable and confidence-building, illustrated by comments like "Debates… build my confidence." Students reported feeling motivated when they noticed progress. A student reflected, "I got all correct… I was so proud". Several learners mentioned being motivated by grades, rewards, or future-oriented goals, such as studying abroad or preparing for future careers. For instance, "If I do business… I'll have to speak English."

A small number of students reported lower motivation during grammar-focused or repetitive lessons. One student commented, "Tired if it's grammar a lot".

How do psychological needs (autonomy, competence, and relatedness) and classroom practices influence ESL learners' motivation in an international school context?

Autonomy

Some students reported feeling more motivated when they were given choices in topics or task formats, particularly for creative activities such as debates or presentations. These students expressed that having choices made learning "more exciting" and allowed them to engage in a way that felt personal and meaningful.

Some students reported that having choices did not noticeably affect their motivation, explaining that choice did not significantly increase or decrease their motivation. Other students expressed a preference for clearer teacher direction, noting that too much choice could be confusing.

Competence

Students described clear experiences that reflected a strong sense of competence in their English learning. These students noted that teacher feedback, praise, and acknowledgement of effort helped them feel more confident. For instance, statements such as "My efforts are seen" and "I got all correct… so proud". Several reported that flexible or step-by-step explanations helped reduce anxiety and made tasks feel more manageable. Remarks such as "It makes me feel less stressed." In contrast, one student described feeling unsure and less motivated when instructions were unclear.

Relatedness

Students described strong peer support and positive relationships with their teacher. Expressions such as "we support each other a lot" and "Teacher believes I can do it"

Some reported feeling supported by peers and encouraged by their teacher, which increased their confidence and willingness to participate. They have peer collaboration and occasionally feel motivated by group activities or teacher feedback, but it is not always consistent. Others described feeling anxious during group work or distracted by disruptive peers.

Classroom Practices Experienced by Students

Several students described losing interest when lessons were "boring" or lacked interactive elements. Students responded positively to creative or enjoyable tasks. Activities described as "more entertaining… not boring worksheets" encouraged greater involvement. Visual learning tools were also reported as helpful, with one student explaining, "I need visuals… it helps me stay motivated. Students consistently preferred games and hands-on activities over worksheets. However, a student shared that "sometimes I don't know what we're doing".

Teacher guidance was another significant factor. When teachers provided help during difficult tasks, students reported feeling more confident and motivated. For instance, one student noted that teacher support "makes me confident". In contrast, with minimal support, especially during any challenging activities, some students felt unsupported, and there were clear responses where an example from a student who mentioned "Teacher doesn't help me much… I think myself". This lack of guidance could lower confidence and hinder progress.

Peer dynamics influenced students' motivation in different ways. While collaborative group work was sometimes described positively, disruptive peer behaviour and anxiety during group activities reduced motivation. Elements of the broader school environment influenced motivation. Exam-related pressure emerged as a demotivating factor, with one student describing assessments as "very hard" and stressful.

DISCUSSION

Students' Motivation to Learn English

Students frequently described intrinsic reasons for engaging in English learning in this international school context. Students described English as enjoyable, interesting, and personally meaningful, especially when lessons allowed them to express themselves creatively or participate in interactive activities. According to Alamer & Lee (2021), enjoyment enhances intrinsic motivation and leads to deeper engagement in language learning.

Extrinsic motives did not replace intrinsic motivation but appeared to function as supportive anchors, reinforcing learners' engagement rather than driving it independently. Lamb et al. (2017) and Dörnyei & Ushioda (2021) discussed that instrumental goals are important where English serves as a pathway to academic and social success. However, in this study, external factors exist, but they do not overshadow their intrinsic motivation and rather complement it.

Rather than indicating a universal ESL motivational pattern, this result reflects the international school context, where English functions as both an academic and social language. Intrinsic motivation dominates because English is embedded in daily school life. Frequent use of English in daily interactions may normalise its role, making enjoyment and personal relevance more prominent sources of motivation.

Competence as the Dominant Motivational Need

This study moves beyond descriptive confirmation of Self-Determination Theory by examining how psychological needs interact within a specific international school ESL context. Rather than operating as equally influential motivational drivers, autonomy, competence, and relatedness appeared to function in an uneven and contextually shaped manner. While all three needs were present in students' accounts, competence consistently emerged as the central condition through which learners sustained motivation and engagement. By highlighting this differentiated functioning of SDT needs, the study offers a context-sensitive refinement of SDT-based ESL motivation research rather than the previously established patterns.

Participants frequently linked their motivation to feeling capable while participating, and receiving positive feedback made them feel motivated. These experiences encouraged continued effort, particularly when students could clearly see improvement in their performance (Câmpean et al., 2024).

Importantly, competence appeared to function as a stabilising motivational factor, even when other psychological needs were less consistently satisfied. Several students remained engaged despite limited autonomy or mixed peer support, suggesting that feeling capable can partially compensate for unmet needs in other areas. Competence satisfaction plays a central role in sustaining motivation, particularly in structured classroom contexts where task success and teacher guidance are significant (Reymond et al., 2022). In such environments, where academic performance and assessment outcomes are important, learners may prioritise feelings of capability.

However, competence was undermined when instructions were unclear or support was insufficient during challenging tasks. As discussed by Dincer et al. (2019), such ambiguity can trigger self-doubt and reduce learners' willingness to participate. These findings highlight that competence is not only built through success and praise but also depends on instructional clarity and appropriate scaffolding in this setting. When students understand what is expected and feel supported in reaching learning goals, their motivation is more likely to be sustained.

The Role of Structured Autonomy in Supporting Motivation

Autonomy emerged as a meaningful but uneven source of motivation among the participants, suggesting that its effectiveness depended largely on how choice was structured within classroom activities. Several students reported that having choices made English learning more engaging and personally relevant. Similarly, the

positive effects of creative and interactive tasks reflect findings by Howard et al. (2021), who claim that enjoyable learning experiences strengthen self-driven engagement.

However, autonomy does not support all learners, as some of them felt neutral and some even felt overwhelmed by the choices provided in ESL classes. When autonomy is insufficiently structured, it may generate confusion or anxiety rather than motivation. (Lamb et al., 2017; Ryan & Deci, 2020).

The element of competence over autonomy and relatedness suggests that, in language learning contexts, feeling capable and receiving clear indicators of progress may be more immediately motivating than choice alone (Ryan & Deci, 2022). This extends SDT-based ESL research by highlighting the importance of guided autonomy, where choice enhances motivation only when it is scaffolded by teacher clarity and expectations. The results indicate that the motivational effects of autonomy depend on the participants' context and level of support, rather than on choice alone.

The Influence of Peer and Teacher Relationships on Motivation

The influence of relatedness was more mixed, depending on peer dynamics and teacher connections. When students experienced supportive peers and teachers, they felt more comfortable participating. A positive school climate, as described by Chen et al. (2025), also contributed to students feeling connected and motivated. Conflict or discomfort within peer relationships reduces the sense of belonging and can lower engagement (Alrabai, 2021; Shao et al., 2024). The findings suggest that relatedness is not the primary motivational driver in this context, where it reinforces motivation when conditions are favourable but offers limited support when classroom dynamics are unstable.

Classroom Practices and the International School Environment

According to Howard et al. (2021), autonomy-supportive and engaging instruction sustains intrinsic motivation, and Alamer (2022) found that meaningful and enjoyable tasks promote deeper learner involvement in EFL contexts. Attention towards peer dynamics is crucial as it does affect their motivation in learning. The finding is consistent with Chen et al. (2025), who argue that positive peer interaction enhances willingness to communicate and classroom engagement, and disruptive peers hinder it.

The international school environment itself functioned as a motivational resource. Opportunities to use English authentically, such as during assemblies, performances, and school-wide activities, made language learning feel purposeful rather than purely academic. As noted by Lamb et al. (2017), such authentic communicative contexts increase the perceived value of English and strengthen learners' intrinsic and instrumental motivation.

Despite these supportive elements, several factors hindered motivation. Limited autonomy and teacher assistance during challenging tasks can further weaken intrinsic motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2017; Oga-Baldwin et al., 2019). A balanced approach that combines choice with teacher guidance appears important for sustaining motivation.

Examinations and performance pressure increased anxiety, which reduced enjoyment and intrinsic motivation. This could lead to controlled motivation rather than self-determined forms of motivation (Grassinger et al., 2024).

CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

This study shows that ESL learners in an international school context are primarily motivated by intrinsic factors, while extrinsic factors as complementary rather than dominant motivators. Motivation was closely linked to the satisfaction of autonomy, competence, and relatedness, with competence emerging as the most consistently fulfilled need. Findings also highlight the central role of classroom practices and school environments in shaping students' motivational experiences.

At the school level, motivation can be strengthened by promoting English use beyond the classroom, which enhances the perceived value of English learning (Shanti & Jaafar, 2021). Teachers should also prioritise

scaffolded and supportive feedback, as recognition of effort and progress consistently strengthened students' sense of competence and willingness to participate (Câmpean et al., 2024). Moreover, the findings indicate that peer collaboration enhances motivation but may hinder engagement when group work is poorly structured, echoing research on the conditional role of relatedness in motivation.

The findings illustrate how autonomy, competence, and relatedness influence ESL motivation in differentiated ways within real classroom contexts (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Importantly, students may remain motivated even when not all three needs are equally satisfied.

This study is limited by its sample size, while the analysis reached interpretive sufficiency for this context, and the focus only a single international school limits the transferability of the findings. Future research should include larger and more diverse samples, compare different year levels, and adopt longitudinal designs to examine motivational changes over time. Comparative studies exploring how different instructional approaches support psychological needs may further extend understanding of ESL motivation across contexts.

REFERENCES

1. Alamer, A. (2021). Construct Validation of Self-Determination Theory in Second Language Scale: The Bifactor Exploratory Structural Equation Modeling Approach. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.732016
2. Alamer, A. (2022). Basic psychological needs, motivational orientations, effort, and vocabulary knowledge: A comprehensive model. Studies in Second Language Acquisition, 44, 164-184. https://doi.org/10.1017/S027226312100005X
3. Alrabai, F. (2021). The Influence of Autonomy-Supportive Teaching on EFL Students' Classroom Autonomy: An Experimental Intervention. Frontiers in Psychology. https://doi.org/10.3389/FPSYG.2021.728657
4. Alamer, A., & Lee, J. (2021). Language achievement predicts anxiety and not the other way around: A cross-lagged panel analysis approach. *Language Teaching Research*, *28*(4), 1572–1593. https://doi.org/10.1177/13621688211033694
5. Alzubi, A. A., Nazim, M., & Ahamad, J. (2024). Examining the effect of a collaborative learning intervention on EFL students English learning and social interaction. Journal of Pedagogical Research. https://doi.org/10.33902/jpr.202425541
6. Azar, A. S., & Tanggaraju, D. (2020). Motivation in second language acquisition among learners in Malaysia. LPPM Unsyiah. https://doi.org/10.24815/siele.v7i2.16506
7. Beyers, W., Soenens, B., & Vansteenkiste, M. (2024). Autonomy in adolescence: a conceptual, developmental and cross-cultural perspective. https://doi.org/10.1080/17405629.2024.2330734
8. Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. Qualitative Research in Psychology, 3(2), 77–101.
9. Câmpean, A., Bocoş, M., Roman, A., Rad, D., Crişan, C., Maier, M., Tăuşan-Crişan, L., Triff, Z., Triff, D., Mara, D., Mara, E., Răduţ-Taciu, R., Todor, I., Baciu, C., Neacşu, M., Dumitru, I., Colareza, C. C., & Roman, C. E. (2024). Examining teachers' perception on the impact of positive feedback on school students. Education Sciences, 14(3), 257. https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci14030257
10. Chen, S., Jin, C., Yin, K., Wang, X., & Wang, T. (2025). Social support and english academic achievement: the mediating role of foreign language emotions and the moderating effect of academic self-concept. https://doi.org/10.1186/s40359-025-03617-9
11. Cotterall, S. & Murray, G. (2024). Learner Autonomy in the Language Classroom. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-66532-5_9
12. Creswell, J. W., & Creswell, J. D. (2018). Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches (5th ed.). Sage Publications.
13. Deci, E. & Ryan, R. (2015). Optimizing Students' Motivation in the Era of Testing and Pressure: A Self-Determination Theory Perspective. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-287-630-0_2
14. Deci, E. L., & Ryan, R. M. (2000). The "what" and "why" of goal pursuits: Human needs and the self-determination of behavior. Psychological Inquiry, 11(4), 227–268.

15. Deci, E. L., Olafsen, A. H., & Ryan, R. M. (2017). Self-Determination Theory in Work Organizations: The State of a Science. Social Science Research Network, 4(1), 19–43. https://doi.org/10.1146/ANNUREV-ORGPSYCH-032516-113108

16. Dincer, A., Yeşilyurt, S., & Noels, K. A. (2019). Self-Determined Engagement in Language Learning: The Relations among Autonomy-Support, Psychological Needs, and Engagement. 8(4), 1130–1147.

17. Dörnyei, Z., & Ushioda, E. (2021). Teaching and researching motivation (3rd ed.). Routledge/Taylor & Francis Group. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781351006743

18. Granberg, C., Palm, T., & Palmberg, B. (2021). A case study of a formative assessment practice and the effects on students' self-regulated learning. Studies in Educational Evaluation, 68, 100955. https://doi.org/10.1016/J.STUEDUC.2020.100955

19. Grassinger, R., Landberg, M., Määttä, S., Vasalampi, K., & Bieg, S. (2024). Interplay of intrinsic motivation and well-being at school. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11031-024-10057-2

20. Guay, F. (2021). Applying Self-Determination Theory to Education: Regulations Types, Psychological Needs, and Autonomy Supporting Behaviors. SAGE Publications Sage CA: Los Angeles, CA. https://doi.org/10.1177/08295735211055355

21. Han, K (2021). Fostering Students' Autonomy and Engagement in EFL Classroom Through Proximal Classroom Factors: Autonomy-Supportive Behaviors and Student-Teacher Relationships. Front. Psychol. 12:767079. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.767079

22. Hennebry-Leung, M. & Hu, X. (2020). Examining the role of the learner and the teacher in language learning motivation. https://doi.org/10.1177/1362168820938810

23. Howard, J., Bureau, J., Guay, F., Chong, J., & Ryan, R. (2021). Student Motivation and Associated Outcomes: A Meta-Analysis From Self-Determination Theory. https://doi.org/10.1177/1745691620966789

24. Hsu, H.-C. K., Wang, C. V., & Levesque-Bristol, C. (2019). Reexamining the impact of self-determination theory on learning outcomes in the online learning environment. Education and Information Technologies, 24(3), 2159–2174. https://doi.org/10.1007/S10639-019-09863-W

25. Jeno, L., Nyléhn, J., Hole, T., Raaheim, A., Velle, G., & Vandvik, V. (2021). Motivational Determinants of Students' Academic Functioning: The Role of Autonomy-support, Autonomous Motivation, and Perceived Competence. https://doi.org/10.1080/00313831.2021.1990125

26. Kashefian-Naeeini, S., Shokrpour, N., & Pakdel, F. (2024). Optimizing EFL learning: exploring the role of learner background factors and the nuances of their effects on intrinsic and extrinsic motivation among university students in a mixed-methods study. https://doi.org/10.1186/s40359-024-02034-8

27. Kim, T. (2006). Interview method development for qualitative study of ESL motivation. Foreign Languages Education, 13(2), 231–256. http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/summary?doi=10.1.1.918.1975

28. Lamb, M., Csizér, K., Henry, A., & Ryan, S. (2017). The Palgrave handbook of motivation for language learning. Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-137-53160-9

29. Langelaan, B. N., Gaikhorst, L., Smets, W., & Oostdam, R. J. (2024). Differentiating instruction: Understanding the key elements for successful teacher preparation and development. Teaching and Teacher Education, 140, 104464. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2023.104464

30. Lim, W. (2024). What Is Qualitative Research? An Overview and Guidelines. https://doi.org/10.1177/14413582241264619

31. McKeering, P., Hwang, Y., & Ng, C. (2021). A study into wellbeing, student engagement and resilience in early-adolescent international school students. https://doi.org/10.1177/14752409211006650

32. Nakata, Y., Takeuchi, O., & McEown, M. S. (2025). Ability beliefs: Why believing in your ability matters in self-regulated language learning. Studies in Second Language Learning and Teaching, 15(2), 375–399. https://doi.org/10.14746/ssllt.48246

33. Nikou, S. A., & Economides, A. A. (2021). A Framework for Mobile-Assisted Formative Assessment to Promote Students' Self-Determination. Future Internet, 13(5), 116. https://doi.org/10.3390/FI13050116

34. Noels, K. A., Vargas Lascano, D. I., Dincer, A., & Yeşilyurt, S. (2019). Self-determination and motivation in language learning: Theory, research, and practice. In M. Lamb, K. Csizér, A. Henry, & S.

Ryan (Eds.), The Palgrave Handbook of Motivation for Language Learning (pp. 95–119). Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-28380-3_5

35. Oga-Baldwin W. Q., Nakata Y. (2017). Engagement, gender, and motivation: A predictive model for Japanese young language learners. System, 65, 151-163.

36. Oga-Baldwin, W. Q. (2019). Acting, thinking, feeling, making, collaborating: The engagement process in foreign language learning. System, 86, 102128. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.system.2019.102128

37. Pat-El, R. J., de Hoog, N., Segers, M., & Vedder, P. (2024). Exploring the impact of student perceptions of Assessment for Learning on intrinsic motivation. Studies in Educational Evaluation. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.stueduc.2024.101420

38. Prananto, K., Cahyadi, S., Lubis, F., & Hinduan, Z. (2025). Perceived teacher support and student engagement among higher education students – a systematic literature review. https://doi.org/10.1186/s40359-025-02412-w

39. Prince, M. (2004). "Does active learning work? A review of the research." Journal of Engineering Education, Washington, 93, 223-232.

40. Reymond, N. C., Nahrgang, R. G., Großmann, N., Wilde, M., & Fries, S. (2022). Why students feel competent in the classroom: A qualitative content analysis of students' views. Frontiers in Psychology, 13, 928801. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.928801

41. Rezai, A., Ahmadi, R., Ashkani, P., & Hosseini, G. H. (2025). Implementing active learning approach to promote motivation, reduce anxiety, and shape positive attitudes: A case study of EFL learners. Acta Psychologica, 253, 104704. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.actpsy.2025.104704

42. Ryan, R. M. & Deci, E. L. (2017). Self-determination theory. Basic psychological needs in motivation, development and wellness. New York, NY : Guilford Press. https://doi.org/10.7202/1041847ar

43. Ryan, R. M., & Deci, E. L. (2020). Intrinsic and extrinsic motivation from a self-determination theory perspective: Definitions, theory, practices, and future directions. Contemporary Educational Psychology, 61, 101860. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cedpsych.2020.101860

44. Ryan, R. & Deci, E. (2022). Self-Determination Theory. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-69909-7_2630-2

45. Shanti, A., & Jaafar, Z. (2021). Beyond classroom English activities to generate interest in English among tertiary students. Asian Journal of University Education, 16(4), 1. https://doi.org/10.24191/ajue.v16i4.11928

46. Shao, Y., Kang, S., Lu, Q., Zhang, C., & Li, R. (2024). How peer relationships affect academic achievement among junior high school students: The chain mediating roles of learning motivation and learning engagement. https://doi.org/10.1186/s40359-024-01780-z

47. Tab, A., & Sabuncuoğlu, O. (2022). An Investigation into Students' and Teachers' Perceptions of the Factors Motivating High School Students to Participate in English Classes at International Schools in Istanbul. Zenodo (CERN European Organization for Nuclear Research). https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.6646363

48. Tomlinson, C. A. (2001). How to differentiate instruction in Mixed-Ability Classrooms. (2nd ed.). https://eric.ed.gov/?q=differentiated+instruction+mixed+ability&id=ED451902

49. Wallace, M., & Leong, E. I. L. (2020). Exploring Language Learning Motivation among Primary EFL Learners. Academy Publication. https://doi.org/10.17507/jltr.1102.10

50. Wang, Y., Wang, H., Wang, S., Wind, S. A., & Gill, C. (2024). A systematic review and meta-analysis of self-determination-theory-based interventions in the education context. Learning and Motivation, 87, 102015. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.lmot.2024.102015

51. Wei, Y. (2025). The Application of Self-Determination Theory in Promoting Language Learning Motivation. Communications in Humanities Research. https://doi.org/10.54254/2753-7064/2024.19328