

Mapping English Majors' Motivation Using McClelland's Theory: The Relationship between Achievement and Power

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ABSTRACT

Motivation is central to learners' engagement and success, with McClelland's Acquired Needs Theory highlighting achievement, power, and affiliation as key drivers. This study examined undergraduate motivation through this framework, focusing on the underexplored role of power. A quantitative survey of 140 undergraduates using a 24-item Likert questionnaire (Pintrich & DeGroot, 1990) showed strong reliability ($\alpha = .818$). Results revealed a strong positive correlation between achievement and power, suggesting both significantly shape academic motivation, while affiliation showed weak negative links to the other needs. These findings indicate students are motivated by a blend of intrinsic mastery goals and extrinsic recognition. The study suggests educators should leverage achievement and power motives while supporting constructive peer relations. Future research should examine discipline-specific contexts to refine these insights.

Keywords: (Learner Motivation, McClelland's Theory, Motivation to Learn)

INTRODUCTION

Motivation is a key factor in learning, influencing achievement and well-being (Trautner et al., 2025). According to McClelland's Acquired Needs Theory, three needs, achievement, power, and affiliation, shape motivation and behaviour. Motivated learners engage actively and respond positively even without rewards (Gopalan et al., 2017). Yet, low academic motivation remains common (Legault et al., 2006). This study applies McClelland's theory to examine why such problems persist.

Research shows significant links between McClelland's needs and student achievement (Corpuz, 2022; Rahim et al., 2023). These needs often work in combination rather than alone (Saufianim et al., 2023). However, the role of power is less clear, with some findings showing little effect on collaboration compared to achievement and affiliation (Rodjanatham, 2025). Moreover, much research is drawn from limited cultural or online contexts, reducing generalizability. This study addresses these gaps by using a person-centered framework and valid measures to explore how the three needs, individually and together, influence learner motivation.

This study investigates learning motivation through McClelland's framework by asking:

1. How does achievement influence learning motivation?
2. How does power influence learning motivation?
3. What is the relationship among these needs in shaping learning motivation?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Framework of the Study

McClelland's *Theory of Motivation* identifies three learned needs, achievement, affiliation, and power, which influence human behaviour and can explain learner motivation (McClelland, 1961; Siok et al., 2023). Learners driven by achievement aim to improve performance and embrace challenges; those high in affiliation value relationships with peers and teachers (Gafarurrozi et al., 2024); while power-driven learners seek control over their own or others' learning (Rahmat & Thasrabiab, 2024).

Other frameworks also address learning motivation. Maslow's *Hierarchy of Needs* (1954) emphasizes progression from basic survival needs to self-actualization, with motivated learners advancing toward higher cognitive engagement (Deshmukh et al., 2021). Ryan and Deci's *Self-Determination Theory* stresses competence, autonomy, and relatedness as drivers of effective learning, highlighting how intrinsic and extrinsic motives interact (Ryan & Deci, 2017; Guay, 2022; Liu et al., 2025). Collectively, these perspectives underline that learning motivation stems from multiple, often overlapping needs.

Past Studies

Research shows that both internal and external factors significantly shape learning motivation. Pranawengtias (2022) found that extrinsic elements such as rewards, punishments, and lecturer quality played a greater role than intrinsic factors in motivating undergraduates to learn English. Similarly, Atma et al. (2021), in a study of 141 elementary students, reported that teaching style and student motivation positively affected academic achievement. These findings highlight that strong instructional practices and external reinforcements are closely tied to student outcomes.

Together, past studies suggest that motivation is multifaceted and context-dependent. While intrinsic factors matter, extrinsic drivers and teaching approaches appear to play a dominant role in sustaining learner engagement and performance.

Conceptual Framework of the Study

This study adopts McClelland's theory as its foundation. The need for achievement relates to goal orientation and task value, where learners strive to excel (Pintrich & DeGroot, 1990). The need for power reflects learners' self-regulation and belief in controlling their own learning (Rahmat & Thasrabiab, 2024). The need for affiliation emphasizes belonging, with students motivated by social connection and fear of exclusion (McClelland, 1965; Pintrich & DeGroot, 1990).

The framework also considers interrelations among the three needs, achievement and power, power and affiliation, and affiliation and achievement, acknowledging that motivation is rarely shaped by one factor alone but by their combined influence.

METHODOLOGY

This quantitative study is done to explore different types of learning needs for undergraduates. A random sample of 140 participants pursuing English as a major responded to the survey. The instrument used is a 5 Likert-scale survey. Table 1 below shows the categories used for the Likert scale; 1 is for Never, 2 is for Rarely, 3 is for Sometimes, 4 is for Very Often and 5 is for Always.

Table 1 shows the distribution of items in the survey. This study is rooted from McClelland's (1965) theory of needs and the instrument is replicated from Pintrich & DeGroot (1990) to reveal the variables in table below. Section B has 12 items on need for Achievement. Section C has 7 items for need for Power.

The study measured motivation using constructs adapted from McClelland's (1965) theory of needs, with three main categories: achievement, power, and affiliation. For the need for achievement, the value component was

assessed through three sub-constructs: intrinsic goal orientation (4 items), extrinsic goal orientation (3 items), and task value beliefs (5 items), giving a total of 12 items with a Cronbach's alpha of .814. The need for power was measured through the expectancy component, consisting of students' perception of self-efficacy (5 items) and control beliefs for learning (2 items), totaling 7 items with a Cronbach's alpha of .823.

Table 1 Reliability Assessment

Section	Type of Need	Cronbach Alpha
B	Need for Achievement	.814
C	Need for Power	.823

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Findings for Need for Achievement

Table 2 Mean for Intrinsic Goal Orientation

Item	M	SD
MSVCQ4: When I have the opportunity in this class, I choose course assignments that I can learn from even if they don't guarantee a good grade.	3.2	1.0
MSVCQ3: The most satisfying thing for me in this program is trying to understand the content of the courses.	3.8	0.9
MSVCQ2: In the courses of a program like this, I prefer course materials that arouse my curiosity, even if they are difficult to learn.	3.5	0.9
MSVCQ1: In this program, I prefer class work that is challenging so I can learn new things.	3.1	0.8

Table 2 presents the mean scores for intrinsic goal orientation. The highest mean was for item MSVCQ 3 (M=3.8, SD=0.9), where students reported greatest satisfaction in understanding course content. This was followed by item MSVCQ 2 (M=3.5, SD=0.9), indicating a preference for materials that sparked curiosity despite difficulty. Item MSVCQ 4 (M=3.2, SD=1.0) showed that students often chose assignments they could learn from even without guaranteed good grades. The lowest mean was item MSVCQ 1 (M=3.1, SD=0.8), reflecting a weaker preference for challenging classwork to learn new things.

Table 3 Mean for Extrinsic Goal Orientation

Item	M	SD
MSEQG3: I want to do well in the classes because it is important to show my ability to my family, friends, or others.	4.2	1.0
MSEQG2: The most important thing for me right now is improving my overall grade point average, so my main concern in this program is getting a good grade.	4.5	0.7
MSEQG1: Getting a good grade in the classes is the most satisfying thing for me right now.	4.5	0.8

Table 3 shows the mean scores for extrinsic goal orientation. The highest means were for item MSEQQ 2 (M=4.5, SD=0.7), where students prioritized improving GPA, and item MSEQQ 1 (M=4.5, SD=0.8), where they valued good grades. The lowest was item MSEQQ 3 (M=4.2, SD=1.0), indicating students wanted to perform well mainly to demonstrate ability to others.

Table 4 Mean for Task Value Beliefs

Item	M	SD
MSTVQ5: Understanding the subject matter of the courses is very important to me.	4.3	0.7
MSTVQ4: I like the subject matter of the courses.	4.0	0.8
MSTVQ3: I think the course material in the courses of this program is useful for me to learn.	4.3	0.7
MSTVQ2: It is important for me to learn the course materials in the courses.	4.2	0.8
MSTVQ1: I think I will be able to transfer what I learn from one course to other courses in this program.	3.8	0.9

Table 4 presents the mean scores for task value beliefs. The highest means were item MSTVQ 3 (M=4.3, SD=0.7), where students found course materials useful, and item MSTVQ 5 (M=4.3, SD=0.7), emphasizing the importance of understanding subject matter. This was followed by item MSTVQ 2 (M=4.2, SD=0.8), stressing the importance of learning course content, and item MSTVQ 4 (M=4.0, SD=0.8), showing students' liking for the subject matter. The lowest mean was item MSTVQ 1 (M=3.8, SD=0.9), reflecting weaker belief in transferring learning across courses.

Findings for Need for Power

Table 5 Mean for Students' Perception of Self-Efficacy

Item	M	SD
ECSEQ5c: Considering the difficulty of the courses, the teachers, and my skills, I think I will do well in the classes.	3.4	0.8
ECSEQ4c: I'm certain I can master the skills being taught in the classes.	3.4	0.8
ECSEQ3c: I'm confident I can do an excellent job on the assignments and tests in this program.	3.4	0.8
ECSEQ2c: I'm confident I can understand the most complex materials presented by the instructors in the courses.	3.1	0.8
ECSEQ1: I believe I will receive excellent grades in the classes.	3.2	0.8

Findings on self-efficacy show that students reported moderately high confidence in their academic abilities, with means ranging from 3.1 to 3.4 on a 4-point scale. The lowest score (M=3.1, SD=0.8) was for understanding complex materials, while the highest (M=3.4, SD=0.8) appeared in doing well on assignments, mastering class skills, and performing in courses despite challenges. Overall, students believed in their academic ability, though confidence was weaker for complex content.

Table 6 Mean for Control Beliefs for Learning

Item	M	SD
ECCBQ2: If I try hard enough, then I will understand the course materials.	4.5	0.6
ECCBQ1: If I study in appropriate ways, then I will be able to learn the material in the courses of this program.	4.2	0.7

Table 6 shows the mean scores for control beliefs in learning. The highest was item 2 (M=4.5, SD=0.6), where students believed, effort would lead to understanding course materials, followed by item 1 (M=4.2, SD=0.7), reflecting confidence in learning through appropriate study methods.

Relationship between Need for Achievement and Need for Power

Table 7 Correlation between Need for Achievement and Need for Power

		Achievement	Power
Achievement	Pearson (Correlation)	1	.541**
	Sig (2-tailed)		.000
	N	140	140
Power	Pearson (Correlation)	.541**	1
	Sig (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	140	140

**Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level(2-tailed)

Table 7 shows a strong positive correlation between need for achievement and need for power ($r = .541^{**}$, $p = .000$). Based on Jackson's (2015) scale, this falls within the strong range (0.5–1.0), confirming a significant association between the two variables.

CONCLUSION

This study mapped motivation among English-major undergraduates in Malaysia using McClelland's Acquired Needs framework, focusing on achievement, power, and affiliation. Results show a predominantly performance-oriented profile: extrinsic goals—especially improving GPA and securing high grades (MSEGG 1 & 2, $M = 4.5$)—were the strongest drivers, echoing Pranawengtias (2022). Intrinsic motives (satisfaction from understanding course content and curiosity-driven learning) were present but less dominant (MSVCQ items $M \approx 3.1$ – 3.8). Task-value scores were high (MSTVQ items $M \approx 3.8$ – 4.3), indicating students view course content as useful and important even if mastery is uneven.

Power-related constructs also played a central role. Students reported moderately high self-efficacy ($M \approx 3.1$ – 3.4 on a 4-point scale) and strong control beliefs—notably the conviction that effort yields understanding ($M = 4.5$). The statistically strong positive correlation between achievement and power ($r = .541^{**}$, $p = .000$) suggests these needs operate together: striving for grades and status aligns with beliefs about personal control and competence. By contrast, affiliation showed limited influence and weak negative association with power, implying that, in this cohort, performance and control often outweigh social-bonding motives.

Together, the findings support McClelland's contention that needs combine differently across contexts: here, achievement and power dominate to create a performance-centered motivational pattern, while affiliation is secondary. Practically, educators should harness students' achievement and power motives by setting clear performance benchmarks, recognizing effort and progress, and structuring tasks that reward mastery—while intentionally cultivating cooperative activities to strengthen affiliation where desirable.

Future research should probe discipline-specific differences (e.g., single-faculty or cross-faculty comparisons) to see whether the dominance of achievement–power is stable across fields or shaped by program culture, assessment design, and teaching practices. Such targeted studies will help tailor interventions that balance performance incentives with social and intrinsic motivators (Pranawengtias, 2022; Atma et al., 2021; McClelland, 1965). Comparing motivation across majors reveals discipline-specific motivational traits and their relevance to the program. Including a qualitative component, such as semi-structured interviews or focus groups, would provide an improved understanding of student motivation. Although the quantitative survey identified the correlations, qualitative data could investigate the reasons for these correlations, elucidating the personal contexts, emotions, and interpretations that underlie students' self-reported needs. A long-term study is able to track students' motivation during the duration of their study to provide insight on how their needs mature which would then reveal their changes and the effects of the students' academic experiences.

Researchers could investigate whether this is a consistent pattern among high-achieving, power-motivated students and whether it results in any adverse social or academic consequences for them.

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