

Learner Motivation As A Moving Target: A Six-Month Study In A Rural English Course

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Abstract

This study investigates how motivation can evolve over time within a fee-based private English course in East Java, Indonesia. Most existing studies have focused on formal educational contexts, and we investigate the realities of what can happen when participation is completely voluntary, meaning learners can actively disengage from learning at any time. This was carried out using Dörnyei's L2 Motivational Self System and Self-Determination Theory frame for motivation, following 18 students aged between 9 to 15 over a period of six months. Data were gathered via reflective journals & semi-structured interviews. The study found motivation in this context was not static, with motivation varying according to how students perceive the class atmosphere, teacher behavior, activities and their own feelings of progression. While many students were influenced by their parents to sign up for the course, they continued to attend feeling that they were being supported and they could do it. Little moments when they received something as simple as praise or were able to successfully complete something had an impact on their motivation and as such, the little praise was not insignificant. If learners encountered a situation where a task felt too difficult, or they did not receive feedback, motivation was lost which sometimes meant they stopped attending. Younger learners appeared to be more affected by if the class felt enjoyable, as older learners began to care about their future aspirations more. The study concludes that in non-formal English education, emotional security and meaningful teacher-student relationships are more crucial than rigid curricula or disciplinary structures.

Keywords: L2 motivational self system, motivation, private English course, self-determination system

Abstrak

Penelitian ini mengkaji bagaimana motivasi belajar bahasa Inggris berkembang dari waktu ke waktu dalam sebuah kursus bahasa Inggris swasta berbayar di Lamongan, Jawa Timur, Indonesia. Sebagian besar penelitian sebelumnya berfokus pada konteks pendidikan formal, sedangkan penelitian ini menyoroti situasi ketika partisipasi bersifat sepenuhnya sukarela, sehingga peserta didik dapat memilih untuk berhenti belajar kapan saja. Penelitian ini menggunakan kerangka *L2 Motivational Self System* dari Dörnyei dan *Self-Determination Theory* untuk menganalisis motivasi belajar 18 siswa berusia 9–15 tahun selama periode enam bulan. Data dikumpulkan melalui jurnal reflektif dan

wawancara semi-terstruktur. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa motivasi dalam konteks ini bersifat dinamis dan berubah-ubah sesuai dengan persepsi siswa terhadap suasana kelas, perilaku guru, aktivitas pembelajaran, serta perasaan mereka mengenai kemajuan belajar yang dicapai. Meskipun banyak siswa awalnya mengikuti kursus karena dorongan orang tua, mereka tetap bertahan karena merasa didukung dan yakin bahwa mereka mampu belajar bahasa Inggris. Pengalaman sederhana seperti menerima pujian dari guru atau berhasil menyelesaikan suatu tugas terbukti memberikan dampak positif terhadap motivasi mereka. Sebaliknya, ketika siswa menghadapi tugas yang dianggap terlalu sulit atau tidak memperoleh umpan balik yang memadai, motivasi mereka cenderung menurun dan dalam beberapa kasus menyebabkan mereka tidak lagi mengikuti kursus. Selain itu, siswa yang lebih muda cenderung lebih dipengaruhi oleh suasana kelas yang menyenangkan, sedangkan siswa yang lebih tua lebih termotivasi oleh aspirasi dan tujuan masa depan mereka. Penelitian ini menyimpulkan bahwa dalam pendidikan bahasa Inggris nonformal, rasa aman secara emosional dan hubungan yang bermakna antara guru dan siswa memiliki peran yang lebih penting dibandingkan kurikulum yang kaku atau struktur disiplin yang ketat.

Kata kunci: L2 Motivational Self System, motivasi, kursus bahasa Inggris swasta, Self-Determination Theory.

Introduction

The increasing demand for English expertise in Indonesia, where English is seen as having value in terms of bolstering social and economic opportunities, and is rarely utilized outside of private lessons, has facilitated a massive expansion of the private language learning institutions. The private language learning institutions offer rapid advancement, personalized instruction in smaller classes; now consider that many students in Indonesia are looking for a better job, enhanced educational opportunities or foreign placement and you can see their appeal. Because of regulated curricula, limited student-teacher ratios and an inability to address individual student needs, public education has not able to deliver meaningful communicative competence in the language students are studying. Nonformal education has the added benefit of being more flexible, accountable, and focused on identifiable learning outcomes. Most of these developments have occurred due to globalisation, intensification of the job market, and the inability of the public educational systems to create transferable skills (Setyaningrum & Purwati, 2020; Surdyanto, 2018). With support from technology and flexible materials, private programs are increasingly regarded as more pragmatic and effective (Hidayati, 2022; Usman & Anwar, 2021).

While these programs attract interest and increasing numbers of participants, learner outcomes remain highly variable. Some learners make progress and express satisfaction; many others lose motivation, disengage, or drop out without achieving their anticipated outcomes. Key factors in the range of outcomes include language-related task anxiety, time lost in academic tasks, and a misalignment between instructional delivery and student expectations (Pravita & Kuswandono, 2022). These factors are not only technical or pedagogical. These very patterns reveal a more fundamental issue: learner motivation. Motivation is at the heart of second language acquisition (SLA), affecting the

route learners take to study, how long learners will stay engaged, and the emotions learners experience when they encounter their own successful or unsuccessful progress. Certainly, under a private, fee-based educational context where attendance is voluntary and formal dropout penalties are often very limited, motivation is a key construct to consider and understand.

In much of the current research on motivation in SLA, motivation is often approached as a fixed characteristic or stable trait, using tools such as measures that only include cross-sectional surveys or one-time measures. Such approaches certainly do not incorporate the changing nature of processing motivation during various stages of engagement in the learning process. In fact, motivational engagement is dynamic—it fluctuates based on both internal personal and external contextual influences, for example: quality of instruction, achievement goals, interaction with peers, emotional regulation, and social contexts. Motivation is not a fixed phenomenon—it fluctuates based on the emotional states, social pressure, and relationships of the learner.

This instability is also found in studies from outside the field in education (i.e., workplaces, etc.) Motivational instability has been linked to psychological contracts in workplace contexts (implicit expectations forming the relationship between employees and employers). When employees believe they have met expectations, motivation and engagement are positively impacted, but when expectations are unclear or never met lack of motivation is likely. This has been a popular topic in the literature relating to job satisfaction and productivity. (Mohiuddin, 2018). These findings illustrate how motivation often responds to perceived fairness, acknowledgment, and emotional support, even in non-academic environments. Furthermore, motivation tends to grow in workplaces where autonomy is respected and meaningful feedback is provided (Donnelly et al., 2021). In fast-paced or high-pressure environments, emotional connection formed through shared experience also reinforces motivation (Aarrestad et al., 2015). These studies support the notion that motivation is context-sensitive and interaction-driven, not solely reliant on internal ambition.

Many studies in SLA still conceptualize motivation either as a stable, or constant, characteristic, and then collect one off data to determine students' level of motivation. These researchers fail to recognize motivation as a fluid experience that learners experience as they meet new challenges, set personal learning goals, and respond to the changing educational and social contexts they find themselves in. It is probable that motivation to persist as a learner was and will be shaped by a complex constellation of factors such as the quality of the educational experience, personal vision or goal, sociocultural context, such as peers, and perceived success or failure. It is a must think of motivation as a process, rather than a product, if we are to develop a conceptualization of motivation that allows us to apply the concept in the best manner possible for the realization of learners' long-term engagement (Guan, 2023).

Most research about motivation in second language learning has been conducted about formal education contexts such as K-12 or university studies, or educational programs that employ a high-stakes exam. These are typically under regulation, mandatory learning contexts that an institution manipulates towards their own objectives. All predominately performance indicators such as marks, imposed curriculum, or external assessment indicators have motivated students in high-stakes, formal educational contexts. This example contrasts with a private English program where students enroll

voluntarily, set their own learning goals, and can disengage without academic risk. Student investment is emotional and often financial, in this environment students maintain their choice and agency. While this allows more freedom for student learning, this also raises different motivation challenges that are rarely explored or documented within motivated learning literature in SLA.

The current research intends to address this gap by investigating learner motivation in a non-formal, private English education context. Specifically, this research seeks to understand the development of learner motivation in a context whereby learners are not constrained by institutional rules and pressures, but rather shaped by their own personal objectives and subjective appraisals of value. A qualitative, longitudinal design was employed, whereby a cohort of learners were observed over a period of six months (approximately) through the use of reflective journals, semi-structured interviews, and personal reflections. This design provides a more intimate and authentic glimpse into the ebbs and flows of fluctuations in motivation that individual students experience, whilst engaged in the learning process.

The research was guided by two theoretical models: Dörnyei's L2 Motivational Self System (L2MSS), and Self-Determination Theory (SDT). According to Dörnyei (2019), the L2MSS considers motivation as being a function of three main factors: the Ideal L2 Self (the language user the learner hopes and intends to become), the Ought-to L2 Self (the language user the learner thinks they ought to become - one based upon some other external expectations [teachers, family, society]), and the L2 Learning Experience (the immediate experience of learning with motivational-related emotional feeling and self-efficiency induced by specific learning experiences). This framework explains the disconnect between a learner's current level of proficiency and their desired state, and sheds light on why some students exhibit motivation for fluent use of the language while others suffer from disengagement, especially if the learning experience does not serve their vision.

SDT is a model developed by Deci and Ryan to describe how motivation is influenced by three basic psychological needs— autonomy (the feeling of control over one's learning), competence (feeling competent and efficacious), and relatedness (the feeling of connection to others in the learning environment). When these needs are fulfilled, learners are more likely to cultivate intrinsic motivation, a type of motivation generated through interest and/or personal satisfaction, and which is not created through any type of reward. Intrinsic motivation is correlated with deep engagement, better learning, and persistence (Bang & Hiver, 2016). Alternatively, extrinsically motivated behaviour (e.g. exams, grading, peers) is only effective for a limited amount of time and will decrease over time. SDT is particularly relevant to private language learning contexts where learners have autonomy over their own path and are not motivated through institutional enforcement, rather through emotional relevance and self-direction.

Taken together, L2MSS and SDT provide a comprehensive framework to understand how and why motivation is transformed in non-formal educational contexts. Both L2MSS and SDT describe motivation as evolving not only because of identity and social experience but also because of emotional experience and social interaction. It must be noted that even though both models could be useful in understanding motivation in market-oriented flexible English learning programs, they have not been widely applied, especially in the Southeast Asian rural context..

In summary, this study attempts to fill the gap on how motivation of learners is transformed over time in a private English program designed to offer flexible learning opportunities. A qualitative lens, through the use of interviews and journals, enables the researcher to better document and understand the lived experiences of students learning English in a setting that offers diminished situational pressure for language learning. By conceptualising motivation as a process rather than a stable personal characteristic, this study attempts to provide information that will contribute to both motivational literature and practical suggestions regarding course design, learner engagement, and pedagogy in the context of non-formal English education in Indonesia. Therefore, this study aims to explore the development of motivation among elementary students in a rural fee-based English course. Specifically, it investigates the emotional, social, and instructional factors that shape students' motivation and examines how these factors contribute to the maintenance or decline of motivation over time.

Methods

A longitudinal qualitative approach was employed to explore changes in students' motivation over time. This method enabled an in-depth examination of learners' experiences, emotions, and perceptions throughout the learning process (Yumriani et al., 2022).

Data were collected over six months from 18 students aged 9–15 years through semi-structured interviews and reflective journals. Interviews were conducted individually at the beginning, middle, and end of the study, with each interview lasting approximately 20–30 minutes. The interviews focused on students' learning goals, motivational experiences, challenges, and perceived progress. Sample questions included: “Why do you want to learn English?”, “What motivates you to attend English classes?”, and “How do you feel when you make progress in learning English?”

In addition, students submitted monthly reflective journals, resulting in a total of 72 journal entries. These journals documented their learning experiences, achievements, challenges, and changing attitudes toward English learning. Older students (13–15 years old) generally produced more detailed reflections, whereas younger students (9–11 years old) tended to write shorter and simpler entries. Therefore, the analysis focused on the meaning and themes expressed rather than the length of the journals.

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis. Coding was informed by Dörnyei's L2 Motivational Self System, Self-Determination Theory, and themes emerging from the data. To enhance reliability, a second coder reviewed a subset of the transcripts and coding results.

Results

Weeks 1–2

The analysis revealed three major themes: (1) initial motivational triggers, (2) changes and fluctuations in motivation, and (3) external influences on learning motivation. To ensure anonymity, participants were identified using codes such as MS (Initial Motivational Triggers), CS (Changes and Fluctuations in Motivation), and ES (External Influences), followed by a participant number.

Initial Motivational Triggers

The findings revealed that most students initially enrolled in the English course

due to external influences rather than personal interest. Parental encouragement emerged as the most frequently reported motivational factor. Many students viewed participation in the course as a response to their parents' expectations regarding academic achievement and future opportunities.

For example, a 10-year-old girl (MS1) explained:

"Disuruh Ibu ikut, katanya biar pintar Bahasa Inggris buat masa depan."

("My mother asked me to join because she said English would be important for my future.")

Similarly, a 14-year-old boy (MS2) reported:

"Nilai aku jelek terus di sekolah, jadi ibu nyuruh buat ikut les di sini."

("My grades were always poor at school, so my mother told me to join this course.")

These responses suggest that students' initial motivation was largely shaped by parental expectations and academic concerns, reflecting the "ought-to L2 self" described in Dörnyei's motivational framework.

However, not all students were motivated by external factors. Some participants expressed genuine interest in English that originated from their exposure to English-language media. A 10-year-old girl (MS3) stated that she enjoyed listening to English songs and wanted to understand their meanings, while a 9-year-old boy (MS4) reported that watching English cartoons increased his curiosity about the language. These examples indicate the presence of intrinsic motivation, where learning English was driven by personal enjoyment and interest.

Peer influence also played a role in students' decisions to enroll. One participant (MS5) explained that he joined the course because his friend had already enrolled. This finding suggests that social relationships may serve as an additional motivational trigger, particularly among younger learners who are strongly influenced by their peer groups. Overall, the findings indicate that students' initial motivation stemmed from a combination of parental encouragement, personal interest in English media, and peer influence. Among these factors, parental encouragement appeared to be the most dominant reason for enrolment.

Changes and Fluctuations in Motivation

Students' motivation was not stable but changed throughout the learning process. At the beginning of the course, most students expressed enthusiasm and enjoyment. For example, a 10-year-old boy (CS1) said that he was excited because he could talk about his pet in English, showing how meaningful and familiar topics increased his engagement.

However, by the third month, some students reported a decline in motivation due to fatigue, boredom, and learning difficulties. One student (CS2) explained that he often felt tired after completing school assignments, while another (CS3) admitted that he became bored when the lessons seemed difficult. These findings suggest that academic workload and challenging materials can reduce learners' motivation over time.

Several students also experienced anxiety and lack of confidence. An 11-year-old girl (CS4) felt embarrassed because she frequently made mistakes when speaking English, whereas a 9-year-old boy (CS5) avoided speaking because he feared being laughed at by classmates. This indicates that negative self-perceptions and peer comparison may hinder participation and motivation.

Despite these challenges, motivation often increased again when students

received encouragement and engaging learning activities. A 10-year-old girl (CS6) reported feeling motivated after receiving positive feedback from her teacher, while another student (CS7) enjoyed participating in quizzes because they allowed her to demonstrate her understanding. These findings highlight the importance of supportive feedback and interactive activities in maintaining students' motivation.

External Influences Shaping Learning Attitudes

The findings showed that students' motivation was strongly influenced by their social and learning environments. Family support emerged as an important factor in sustaining motivation. Several students reported receiving encouragement from family members, such as help with vocabulary learning or regular discussions about their progress. For example, one student (ES1) received assistance from an older sibling in memorizing vocabulary, while another (ES2) felt more motivated when her mother asked about what she had learned. These findings suggest that parental and family involvement can reinforce students' commitment to learning English.

In contrast, limited support at home sometimes hindered learning. One participant (ES3) explained that no family member could help him practice English, making it difficult to remember what he had learned. This indicates that the absence of a supportive learning environment may reduce opportunities for reinforcement outside the classroom.

Teacher-related factors also played a significant role in shaping students' attitudes toward learning. Students responded positively to enthusiastic and interactive teaching practices. For instance, one participant (ES4) reported feeling more motivated when the teacher used engaging activities rather than relying solely on reading tasks. Conversely, another student (ES5) expressed confusion and reduced motivation when asked to complete exercises without sufficient explanation. These responses highlight the importance of clear instruction and active teaching strategies in maintaining learner engagement.

Peer relationships likewise influenced participation and attendance. One student (ES6) admitted that he was less motivated to attend class when his friends were absent, suggesting that social connections contributed to students' commitment to the course. For many participants, the English course was also the only environment where they could actively use English. As noted by one student (ES7), opportunities to communicate in English outside the classroom were extremely limited. This finding underscores the importance of the course as a key context for language practice.

Despite various challenges, students generally maintained positive long-term aspirations. For example, a 15-year-old student (ES8) expressed a strong desire to speak English fluently like the characters she watched in movies. This suggests that future goals and personal aspirations continued to serve as important sources of motivation, even when students encountered difficulties in their learning journey.

Overall, the findings indicate that students' motivation was shaped by a combination of family support, teacher practices, peer relationships, learning opportunities, and future aspirations. Among these factors, supportive family and teacher interactions appeared to play the most significant role in sustaining motivation over time.

Observed Trends by Age and Maturity

The findings revealed noticeable differences in motivation between younger and older learners. Students aged 13–15 tended to be more goal-oriented and were more likely to connect English learning with future opportunities such as academic achievement,

scholarships, competitions, or career aspirations. They also appeared to be more sensitive to feedback and peer comparison, often evaluating their progress in relation to others.

In contrast, students aged 9–11 described their learning experiences primarily in emotional terms. Their motivation was strongly influenced by how they felt during lessons, frequently using expressions such as “happy,” “tired,” or “embarrassed.” For these younger learners, motivation was closely linked to the immediate classroom atmosphere and the enjoyment of learning activities.

These findings suggest that motivational needs vary across developmental stages. While younger learners benefit from enjoyable, supportive, and low-pressure learning environments, older students may respond more positively to clear goals, constructive feedback, and opportunities to connect English learning with their future aspirations. Therefore, age-appropriate instructional strategies are essential for sustaining motivation among young EFL learners.

Insights from Reflective Journals

In addition to the interviews, reflective journals provided valuable insights into students’ motivational and emotional development throughout the six-month course. The journals captured experiences, challenges, achievements, and personal reflections that were not always expressed during interviews or classroom interactions. To ensure confidentiality, students were identified using the code RJ (Reflective Journal) followed by a participant number.

Analysis of the journal entries revealed several recurring themes related to motivation, emotions, learning experiences, and personal growth. The journals showed that students’ motivation changed over time and was influenced by a variety of factors, including classroom experiences, teacher support, peer relationships, and perceptions of progress. They also provided evidence of how students interpreted their learning experiences and responded to both successes and challenges.

Compared with the interview data, the journals offered a more continuous picture of students’ learning journeys by documenting their thoughts and feelings across the six-month period. As a result, the journals complemented the interview findings and helped strengthen the understanding of motivational development among young EFL learners. Six major themes emerged from the analysis of the reflective journals and are presented in the following sections.

Early-Stage Excitement and Idealized Goals

During the first few weeks, most students expressed excitement and enthusiasm about learning English. Their journal entries often reflected idealized future goals, shaped by imagined possibilities or role models.

One 11-year-old student (RJ1) shared:

“*Aku pengen bisa bahasa Inggris biar bisa kerja di luar negeri kayak Mbak sepupu. Dia katanya kerja di kapal pesiar, bisa keliling dunia.*”

This illustrates what Dörnyei (2009) defines as the Ideal L2 Self—a vision of oneself as a successful English user in a meaningful real-world context. However, many of these goals lacked actionable direction, particularly among younger students.

For example, two students, 9 and 11 year-old boys (RJ2, RJ3) wrote:

“*Belajar biar pintar.*”
“*Biar nanti pas SMP bisa ngerti kalau ada pelajaran Inggris.*”

These responses indicate extrinsically driven motivation based on perceived

obligation or future academic utility, but not yet internalized.

The early stage of the course was marked by high emotional energy. Students were eager, hopeful, and motivated by a combination of parental expectation, social influence, and curiosity. However, their goals were often broad and lacked specific learning strategies or personal ownership.

Weeks 3–6: Struggles and Motivational Dips

As the course progressed into the third and fourth weeks, student reflections revealed signs of fatigue, cognitive overload, and emotional withdrawal. The excitement of the early stage began to fade as students encountered more complex content and classroom demands. A 13-year-old boy (RJ4) wrote:

“Tadi disuruh bikin kalimat, tapi aku bingung. Nulisnya salah terus. Malu juga kalau disuruh baca keras-keras, takut diketawain.”

Another 14-year-old boy (RJ5) commented on grammatical confusion:

“Aku nggak ngerti kenapa harus belajar ‘there is’ sama ‘there are’. Rasanya ribet banget.”

The mismatch between effort and perceived progress created a sense of stagnation. Without timely emotional or instructional support, students became increasingly demotivated. It was clear that external expectations alone were no longer enough to keep motivation stable.

Rebuilding Through Feedback and Small Wins

A gradual recovery phase followed, triggered primarily by teacher feedback and manageable success experiences. Students responded positively to personal encouragement, especially when it acknowledged their effort or progress. A 10-year-old girl (RJ6) wrote:

“Aku senang waktu Miss nya bilang ‘kamu pintar sekarang udah ngerti perbedaan is dan are.’ Jadi aku semangat lagi ngerjain tugas.”

These affirmations, though small, were powerful. They helped rebuild confidence and fostered renewed willingness to participate. For many students, motivation was not reignited through major breakthroughs, but through the emotional impact of being seen, heard, and affirmed.

This phase highlighted the critical role of **relatedness** and **competence** as motivational anchors. When students felt they mattered and could succeed, even in small ways, their engagement stabilized and began to grow again.

Mid-Course Plateau and Routine Engagement

By weeks 8 to 10, most students entered a period of emotional plateau. Their journal entries became less expressive but more consistent. Motivation was no longer defined by excitement or crisis—it shifted into routine. 12 and 13 year-old girls (RJ7, RJ8) shared:

“Tugas minggu ini lumayan gampang.”

“Aku suka pas belajar nama-nama hewan karena gampang dihafal.”

While less emotionally charged, this phase represented an important developmental shift. Students began showing signs of self-regulated learning—completing tasks not because of external prompts, but out of habit or personal structure. Motivation became less reactive and more stable. Even students who struggled earlier began to demonstrate quiet persistence.

This stage should not be mistaken for disengagement. It reflected a healthy adjustment as students internalized the routine of language learning and navigated it with more independence.

Peer Influence: Support and Comparison

Social interaction consistently shaped motivation throughout the journaling period. Many students cited games, group work, and peer encouragement as highlights of their learning experience. 13 year-old girl (RJ9) wrote:

“Main game tebak gambar itu seru. Aku bisa ngomong ‘cat, dog, tiger’ duluan. Teman-teman juga ketawa, jadi enggak tegang.”

For students like RJ9, learning was not just academic—it was social and emotional. Shared laughter, group achievements, and positive classroom dynamics created a relaxed learning atmosphere that encouraged participation.

However, not all peer influence was constructive. A 12-year-old boy (RJ10) reflected:

“Temanku cepet banget hafal. Aku kadang iri. Tapi dia sering ngajarin juga, jadi aku senang.”

This duality—envy and admiration—reveals how peer comparison can both inspire and discourage. Without proper teacher intervention, these dynamics could lead to competitiveness, which risks marginalizing struggling students.

Late-Stage Reflection and Goal Reorientation

Toward the final weeks of the course, some students began to exhibit more reflective and autonomous thinking. They articulated clearer goals and redefined their reason for learning English.

A 15-year-old student (RJ11) shared: *“Awalnya aku ikut kursus karena disuruh Ibu. Tapi sekarang aku ngerti kalau bisa ngomong Inggris itu keren. Aku pengen coba daftar lomba pidato deh.”*

An 11-year-old student (RJ12) expressed pride in their growing ability: *“Sekarang aku bisa nyanyi lagu bahasa Inggris dari YouTube. Teman-temanku juga minta diajarin.”*

These entries represent a meaningful motivational shift—from extrinsic obligation to intrinsic interest. English was no longer just a subject or task; it became part of their social identity, a source of pride, and a tool for expression. This evolution is central to long-term engagement. When students internalize their reasons for learning and connect them to their sense of self, motivation becomes self-sustaining—even beyond the classroom.

Outliers and Signs of Withdrawal

Not all students experienced positive development. A small group showed declining engagement as the course progressed. Their entries became shorter, repetitive, or nonexistent.

A 10-year-old student (RJ13) wrote: *“Minggu ini belajar grammar lagi. Bosan.”*

An 11-year-old student (RJ14) admitted: *“Aku nggak ngerti tugas minggu ini, jadi nggak ngerjain.”*

These cases often reflected unmet psychological needs—low confidence, lack of feedback, or minimal support at home. In at least two cases, students stopped attending entirely. These outliers are critical reminders that motivation is fragile, especially in

voluntary, non-formal programs.

Discussion

This study demonstrates that student motivation in private, non-formal English courses is far from stable. Instead, it fluctuates continuously, shaped by emotion, social feedback, teaching quality, and personal development. In a voluntary environment where participation is self-driven, understanding what sustains or disrupts motivation is crucial. Drawing on data from interviews and reflective journals, several key patterns emerged that confirm and extend existing theories while providing insight into what actually keeps young learners engaged—or causes them to withdraw.

Motivation as Obligation: The Role of External Pressures

Many students in this study began the course with motivations rooted in external pressure—particularly parental influence. For example, MS1 and MS2 both cited their parents' encouragement or instruction as the primary reason they enrolled. This form of “ought-to” motivation aligns with Dörnyei's concept of external regulatory forces shaping learner behavior (Dörnyei, 2019). It was effective for initial enrollment, but rarely strong enough to sustain motivation once difficulties arose.

This observation echoes a broader body of literature. Numerous studies have shown that external pressures—whether from parents, schools, or policy systems—can significantly influence motivation, but not always in positive ways. Näkk & Timoštšuk (2021), for instance, examined how primary teachers in Estonia felt compelled by neoliberal education reforms, resulting in motivation driven more by societal expectations than internal conviction. In their findings, parental pressure emerged as a dominant external force—shaping not only teacher practices, but indirectly, the motivational environments of students.

Extrinsic motivation—especially when rooted in obligation—often leads to surface-level engagement rather than deep, sustained learning (Gushue & Hinman, 2018). While it may generate short-term compliance, it tends to lack the emotional commitment needed for persistence. In this study, that pattern was visible: once the novelty of the course wore off or academic challenges intensified, students relying solely on external drivers often disengaged unless other motivational supports were in place.

Altogether, these findings suggest that while external motivations may serve as an entry point, they are unstable without emotional reinforcement. Especially in a non-formal, voluntary learning space, motivation must evolve beyond obligation to remain effective.

The Emotional Cost of Low Perceived Competence

As the course progressed, several students—such as RJ4, CS3, and CS4—described growing feelings of confusion, embarrassment, and fear, particularly when engaging in grammar tasks or public speaking. These emotional responses often triggered motivational decline and classroom withdrawal. In many cases, it wasn't the complexity of the content that caused disengagement, but the learner's belief that they couldn't succeed. This aligns with Self-Determination Theory, which emphasizes perceived competence as a critical condition for sustaining intrinsic motivation.

The emotional burden tied to feeling incapable is well-documented. Ahmed et al. (2019) found that among nursing students, low emotional competence—often linked to high stress and poor coping—was a strong predictor of diminished psychological well-

being. Though in a different academic context, the underlying mechanism is comparable: when learners doubt their abilities and lack emotional regulation tools, motivation erodes, often quickly.

In this study, those emotional dips were not irreversible. Students like RJ6 and CS6 regained motivation after receiving even modest praise or recognition from teachers. These moments helped repair perceived competence and restored their willingness to engage. It was rarely the content itself that reactivated motivation—it was the emotional validation that accompanied it. As (Nguyen Huu Anh Vuong & Le, 2021) suggest, consistent feedback and reflective prompts can help learners rebuild their self-image and maintain momentum, especially when navigating learning setbacks.

Ultimately, these findings affirm that addressing emotional competence and perceived capability is not just a psychological add-on—it is central to keeping students engaged in learning, particularly in non-formal environments where traditional academic supports may be absent.

Classroom Climate as the Engine of Motivation

The emotional atmosphere of the classroom consistently influenced whether students stayed motivated. Those who described lessons as fun, active, or collaborative—such as CS1, ES4, and RJ9—remained engaged. In contrast, those like RJ13 and ES5, who experienced the class as repetitive or confusing, began to disengage.

These responses highlight the critical role of the “L2 Learning Experience,” which (Dörnyei, 2019) emphasizes as one of the most powerful components in sustained motivation. The data suggest that it’s not simply *what* students learn, but *how* they experience it. When teachers used games, gave praise, or encouraged social interaction, students felt energized. When the class felt dull or isolating, motivation dropped quickly.

Especially in a non-formal setting without tests or grades, the classroom’s emotional tone carries even more weight. As (Yumriani et al., 2022) note, in environments where participation is optional, the teacher becomes the central source of emotional regulation, structure, and affirmation. If that presence fails, the whole system breaks down.

Peer Influence: Collaboration and Comparison

Peer interaction had a major influence on motivational outcomes—sometimes helpful, sometimes harmful. For example, RJ9 and ES6 described classroom games and shared laughter as highlights of the week. These collaborative experiences lowered anxiety, made speaking safer, and gave students a sense of belonging.

On the other hand, students like CS5, RJ10, and CS4 reported feeling demotivated when comparing themselves to more capable peers. These moments created doubt, silence, and reluctance to participate. The fear of embarrassment or being laughed at was strong enough to override the desire to speak, even in otherwise supportive environments.

This dual role of peer influence supports (Theriana, 2023), who found that while group settings can build motivation through social bonding, they can also intensify self-consciousness and perceived inadequacy. The implication here is that peer interaction must be guided intentionally. Teachers must not only organize group tasks, but also monitor how students interact during those moments to prevent subtle exclusion or ridicule.

Age and Developmental Stage: Diverging Motivational Pathways

Age played a clear role in how students understood and described their

motivation. Younger students (ages 9–11), such as RJ2, RJ3, RJ6, and CS1, focused on emotional reactions. Their engagement rose or fell depending on whether the lesson felt fun, tiring, or confusing. For them, motivation was mostly about the moment: if it felt good, they stayed engaged; if it didn't, they withdrew.

Older students (ages 13–15), including MS2, CS2, RJ11, and ES8, increasingly framed English learning in terms of long-term goals. RJ11, for example, described wanting to join a speech competition, while ES8 connected English fluency with future confidence. These students also responded more sensitively to feedback and peer comparison—both positively and negatively. Their motivational shifts were less tied to momentary emotions and more connected to imagined futures and developing identity.

These findings support Guan (2023), who argues that adolescent learners begin to interpret language learning through the lens of who they want to become, not just what they feel now. As a result, teachers must tailor their approach: younger students need emotional stimulation, while older students benefit more from clear pathways, goal-setting, and identity alignment.

Private Courses as Emotion-Driven Ecosystems

Unlike formal schools, private courses operate without institutional accountability or standardized structures. Students can drop out without penalty, which makes their presence in class deeply personal. For this reason, affective support becomes the core mechanism for retaining motivation. When students like RJ7, RJ8, and RJ12 stayed motivated, it wasn't because of curriculum pressure—it was because they felt seen, heard, and successful.

Conversely, RJ13, RJ14, and ES3 illustrated how quickly motivation faded when emotional or instructional needs were unmet. These were not failures of intelligence or effort, but signs that the course had not made room for their psychological reality.

Mudra & Mckinnon (2022) describe these learning spaces as affective ecosystems: relational environments where motivation grows or dies based on connection, safety, and responsiveness. Using the lens of Self-Determination Theory, motivation endured when students felt a degree of autonomy (the freedom to choose), competence (the belief they could succeed), and relatedness (the feeling that they mattered). The moment any of those collapsed, so did motivation.

This study confirms that the emotional fabric of instruction—not just material design—determines whether learners continue or walk away.

Visible Progress and Delayed Gratification

Many students described specific moments when they felt proud of improvement, such as understanding vocabulary, passing a quiz, or being praised for pronunciation. RJ7, RJ8, and CS7 reported that these small signs of success gave them confidence to keep trying. These micro-wins acted as emotional fuel, validating their effort and making the learning process feel worthwhile.

In contrast, RJ5, RJ13, and CS3 reflected the opposite trajectory. When they didn't see results—especially after investing effort—they became frustrated. For younger students especially, the lack of immediate progress translated into disengagement. It wasn't that they didn't care; it was that they stopped believing their effort mattered.

Wang (2023) emphasizes the need for visible markers of growth in second language classrooms. In this study, such markers proved crucial in non-formal settings. Without exams or grades to signal success, students relied on feedback, teacher

validation, and peer response to assess their progress. Where that feedback loop was clear, motivation survived. Where it was absent, motivation deteriorated.

CONCLUSION

The findings revealed that emotional competence, supportive classroom environments, positive peer relationships, visible learning progress, and age-related developmental differences played important roles in influencing students' motivation. Students were more likely to remain engaged when they felt emotionally supported, experienced success, and perceived meaningful progress in their learning. Conversely, motivation tended to decline when learners experienced anxiety, negative peer comparison, or a lack of visible achievement.

This study contributes to the literature on second language motivation by highlighting the importance of affective and relational factors in non-formal learning environments. While previous studies have often emphasized achievement goals and future aspirations, the present findings demonstrate that emotional safety, encouragement, and social support are equally important in sustaining motivation among young EFL learners, particularly in rural contexts.

The findings also provide practical implications for English teachers and course providers. Creating a supportive classroom atmosphere, providing constructive feedback, recognizing students' progress, and promoting positive peer interaction may help maintain learners' motivation and participation. In non-formal educational settings, where attendance is voluntary, these factors may be even more important than curriculum content itself. This study is limited to one rural English course and a relatively small number of participants. Therefore, future research is recommended to investigate motivational development in different educational contexts and to employ longitudinal mixed-method designs to gain a deeper understanding of learners' motivational trajectories.

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