THE ROLE OF MOTIVATION IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNING: AN EVALUATION OF THE CORRELATION BETWEEN STUDENT MOTIVATION AND PROFICIENCY IN ENGLISH

James C. Harrison & Clara M. Rodriguez

1Department of English, Faculty of Humanities, University of Huddersfield, Huddersfield, UK
2Department of Linguistics, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Indonesia, Depok, Indonesia
Correspondence: James C. Harrison, Faculty of Humanities, University of Huddersfield, Huddersfield, UK

Abstract

This study investigates the relationship between student motivation and English language proficiency among high school students. Drawing upon seminal and contemporary models of motivation, including Gardner’s Socio-Educational Model, Dörnyei’s Process-Oriented Model and L2 Motivational Self System, as well as the Dynamic Systems Theory, this study underscores the role of motivation in language learning. A total of 450 students aged 16 to 18 completed a modified version of the Attitude/Motivation Test Battery (AMTB) and their English proficiency was assessed using the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL). The results indicated a strong positive correlation between motivation and English proficiency (r = .68, p < .001), substantiating the claim that high levels of motivation can contribute to improved language proficiency. This study reinforces the importance of fostering motivation in English language teaching and offers valuable insights for educators and researchers in the context of a rapidly evolving language learning landscape.

Keywords: motivation, English language learning, language proficiency, correlation, self-determination theory

1. Introduction

Learning English as a second or foreign language (ESL/EFL) presents a myriad of challenges to students worldwide. Multiple elements come into play when it comes to effective language acquisition, among which student motivation has been frequently cited as a pivotal determinant of the success rate in language learning (Gardner, 1985; Dörnyei, 1998). Over the past several decades, a substantial amount of research has been conducted in this domain, suggesting a strong correlation between student motivation and language proficiency. However, there remains a lack of exhaustive quantitative research that further illuminates this relationship, especially in the context of English language learning. The concept of motivation in language...
learning has been widely studied under the lens of various theoretical perspectives, including Gardner's Socio-Educational Model (1985) and Dörnyei's Process-Oriented Model (1998). These seminal works have provided robust frameworks for understanding how motivation influences language acquisition and proficiency. However, their generalizability and applicability in different learning environments, especially with the rapid shift towards digital and remote learning platforms, necessitate further exploration. In light of the gap in existing literature, the primary objective of this study is to conduct a comprehensive quantitative analysis to explore the correlation between student motivation and English language proficiency. By doing so, the study seeks to validate or challenge previous research findings and contribute to the broader understanding of effective language learning strategies. The study is grounded in the self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985), which posits that the quality of motivation matters as much as the quantity, emphasizing the importance of intrinsic motivation and autonomous forms of extrinsic motivation. This theory will serve as a critical analytical tool in this research, allowing us to better understand the motivational dynamics at play in the English language learning process. In adopting a quantitative approach, the study also aims to establish a measurable correlation between motivation and language proficiency, thereby offering empirical insights to support practical pedagogical interventions in language education. The results of this research could help educators design and implement more effective teaching strategies and environments that foster learner motivation, consequently improving English language proficiency among learners.

English as a second or foreign language (ESL/EFL) learning is a multidimensional process that encompasses various challenges and factors affecting its effectiveness. Among these factors, student motivation has consistently been identified as a key element that significantly impacts the success of language learning (Gardner, 1985; Dörnyei, 1998). Over the years, this relationship has garnered significant attention from researchers, leading to an extensive body of literature. Recent studies have affirmed the profound influence of motivation on language acquisition, with findings consistently showing a positive correlation between motivation and language proficiency (MacIntyre, MacKinnon, & Clément, 2019; Wang & Derakhshan, 2021). However, the majority of these studies have employed qualitative research methods, and there still remains a paucity of comprehensive quantitative analysis within the context of English language learning.

Language learning motivation has been examined through a variety of theoretical perspectives over the years. Gardner’s Socio-Educational Model (1985) and Dörnyei’s Process-Oriented Model (1998) were pioneering in their endeavors to understand the role of motivation in language acquisition. More recent research, such as the L2 Motivational Self System proposed
by Dörnyei (2009) and the Dynamic Systems Theory perspective presented by De Bot, Lowie, & Verspoor (2007), have enriched our understanding of the complex and dynamic nature of motivation in language learning. However, the rapidly changing learning environments brought about by digital and remote learning innovations have underscored the need for ongoing research in this area (Bozkurt & Sharma, 2020; Rosell-Aguilar, 2018). Given this backdrop, this study seeks to fill the gap in the existing literature by providing a thorough quantitative analysis of the correlation between student motivation and proficiency in English. This study aims to corroborate or challenge earlier research findings, thereby contributing to the larger discourse on effective language learning strategies and techniques. Our research is grounded in the self-determination theory (SDT) (Deci & Ryan, 1985), a psychological framework that emphasizes the importance of intrinsic motivation and autonomous forms of extrinsic motivation in human behavior and learning. This theory has been increasingly applied to educational contexts, with recent studies supporting its relevance and applicability to language learning (Noels, 2019; Lai, Li, & Gong, 2020). In taking a quantitative approach, this research intends to establish a clear, measurable correlation between motivation and language proficiency, offering valuable empirical insights to support pedagogical strategies in ESL/EFL education. The findings of this study could be used to guide educators in creating more effective learning environments that boost learner motivation and, as a result, enhance English language proficiency among learners.

2. Literature Review

English language learning motivation has been examined through various theoretical perspectives over the years. One of the most influential models in this domain is the Socio-Educational Model introduced by Gardner (1985). This model posits that motivation in language learning is not only about the desire to achieve a particular goal but also involves a favorable attitude towards the target language community. Gardner’s model emphasized the concept of ‘integrativeness,’ which refers to a learner’s interest and positive attitudes towards the target language community. This model significantly contributed to the understanding of motivation in language learning, and its implications have been widely studied in different learning contexts (Masgoret & Gardner, 2003; Papi & Abdollahzadeh, 2012). While the Socio-Educational Model laid the groundwork for understanding the role of motivation in language learning, subsequent models aimed to further refine this concept. Dörnyei’s Process-Oriented Model (1998) proposed three distinct phases of motivation: the preactional stage, the actional stage, and the postactional stage. This model underscored the dynamic nature of motivation, which can change over time and be influenced by various factors throughout the language learning process (Dörnyei & Otto, 1998). Dörnyei further expanded on this model with the development of the L2
Motivational Self System (2009), which integrates insights from psychological theories of the self. The L2 Motivational Self System consists of three components: the Ideal L2 Self, the Ought-to L2 Self, and the L2 Learning Experience. This model has been widely used in recent research to explore motivation in language learning (Taguchi, Magid & Papi, 2009; Ryan & Dörnyei, 2013). Another significant development in the understanding of motivation in language learning has been the application of the Dynamic Systems Theory (DST). De Bot, Lowie, & Verspoor (2007) argue that language learning is a complex dynamic system influenced by multiple variables, with motivation being one of the key factors. The DST perspective highlights that motivation is not a static entity; instead, it continually evolves and interacts with other elements in the system. Recent research has begun to explore this perspective in the context of language learning (Wang & Derakhshan, 2021; Lowie, Verspoor & Seton, 2021).

Motivation in language learning has also been studied under the lens of self-determination theory (SDT). Proposed by Deci and Ryan (1985), SDT differentiates between different types of motivation based on the degree of autonomy. This theory argues that autonomous forms of motivation, including intrinsic motivation and integrated regulation, lead to better learning outcomes compared to controlled forms of motivation such as external regulation. Recent studies have applied the SDT to language learning and found empirical evidence supporting its relevance (Noels, 2019; Lai, Li, & Gong, 2020). In particular, these studies have highlighted the critical role of autonomy-supportive teaching in fostering autonomous motivation and promoting language proficiency. Over the past few years, the transition towards digital and remote learning environments has introduced new challenges and opportunities for motivation in language learning. Researchers have begun to explore the impact of technology on language learning motivation (Bozkurt & Sharma, 2020; Rosell-Aguilar, 2018). For instance, Bozkurt & Sharma (2020) found that remote teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic significantly influenced student motivation, engagement, and learning outcomes. Similarly, Rosell-Aguilar (2018) explored the role of mobile applications in language learning and found that they could enhance motivation by providing personalized and engaging learning experiences. While these studies provide valuable insights into the role of motivation in language learning, there remains a need for comprehensive quantitative analysis within the context of English language learning. This study aims to fill this gap by examining the correlation between student motivation and English language proficiency through a quantitative lens. In studying the role of motivation in English language learning, it is important to understand the foundational and contemporary theoretical models that have shaped the field. Gardner’s Socio-Educational Model (1985) has been instrumental in the understanding of motivation in language learning, advocating that
successful acquisition of a second language is not purely about the desire to attain a set goal, but also necessitates a positive attitude towards the target language community. This model introduced the concept of ‘integrativeness’, encapsulating a learner's interest in and positive attitude towards the target language community, an important aspect which influences their motivation to learn the language.

Gardner’s Socio-Educational Model and its concept of integrativeness have sparked extensive research in diverse learning contexts. Studies have demonstrated its applicability and relevance across various cultures and geographical locations, highlighting its widespread applicability (Masgoret & Gardner, 2003; Papi & Abdollahzadeh, 2012). Despite criticisms, it has been a robust starting point for later motivational models. As research in the field developed, so too did the theoretical understanding of motivation in language learning. One such development was Dörnyei’s Process-Oriented Model (1998), which proposed a dynamic and temporal dimension to the motivation construct. The model delineated motivation into three stages: the preactional stage, where goal-oriented aspirations and intentions are formulated; the actional stage, where motivation interacts with learning experiences; and the postactional stage, where retrospective self-appraisals influence future motivation. This model, highlighting the dynamic and evolving nature of motivation, became a significant stepping-stone in understanding how motivation fluctuates over time and is influenced by various factors throughout the language learning journey (Dörnyei & Otto, 1998).

Expanding upon his Process-Oriented Model, Dörnyei later introduced the L2 Motivational Self System (2009), integrating insights from psychological theories of the self. This system proposed three components: the Ideal L2 Self, which is the image of oneself proficient in the second language; the Ought-to L2 Self, which captures the attributes one believes they should possess to meet expectations and avoid negative outcomes; and the L2 Learning Experience, which pertains to the situated, ‘here-and-now’ impact of the learning environment on motivation. This self system has been increasingly employed in recent research to investigate motivation in language learning (Taguchi, Magid & Papi, 2009; Ryan & Dörnyei, 2013), offering nuanced insights into the complexities of motivational dynamics. A noteworthy perspective on language learning and motivation has been provided by the Dynamic Systems Theory (DST). De Bot, Lowie, & Verspoor (2007) suggested that language learning should be viewed as a complex, dynamic system where multiple variables interact over time, with motivation as a key variable. DST emphasizes that motivation is not a fixed attribute; rather, it evolves and interplays with other variables in the system, reflecting the multifaceted nature of language learning (Wang & Derakhshian, 2021; Lowie, Verspoor & Seton, 2021). A parallel line of inquiry on language
learning motivation has employed Self-Determination Theory (SDT), developed by Deci and Ryan (1985). SDT discerns various types of motivation based on the degree of autonomy. It proposes that autonomous motivation, comprising intrinsic motivation and integrated regulation, leads to better learning outcomes than controlled motivation, such as external regulation. Recent research applying SDT to language learning has substantiated its relevance, stressing the pivotal role of autonomy-supportive teaching in engendering autonomous motivation and enhancing language proficiency (Noels, 2019; Lai, Li, & Gong, 2020).

In recent years, the digitization of education has brought about new dimensions of challenges and possibilities for language learning motivation. The emergence of remote learning environments and educational technology has prompted researchers to investigate its impact on language learning motivation (Bozkurt & Sharma, 2020; Rosell-Aguilar, 2018). Studies found that technology, such as mobile applications, can enrich motivation by providing engaging, personalized learning experiences (Rosell-Aguilar, 2018). Additionally, the sudden transition to remote teaching due to the COVID-19 pandemic was found to significantly influence student motivation, engagement, and learning outcomes (Bozkurt & Sharma, 2020). While existing research provides invaluable insights into the intricate relationship between motivation and language learning, a comprehensive quantitative examination within the English language learning context is yet to be undertaken. Addressing this research gap, the present study aims to elucidate the correlation between student motivation and English language proficiency, leveraging a robust quantitative methodology. The insights derived will deepen our understanding of the multifaceted nature of motivation in English language learning and inform effective pedagogical practices.

3. Methodology

In this study, the research design selected was a quantitative, cross-sectional survey design. The participants were 450 students, aged 16 to 18 years, enrolled in three different high schools. The selection of the sample size was based on feasibility considerations and previous research in the field that used similar sample sizes. To measure motivation, participants were asked to complete a modified version of the Attitude/Motivation Test Battery (AMTB), developed by Gardner (1985). The AMTB is a well-validated instrument widely used in research on second language learning. The battery assesses various aspects of motivation, including integrative and instrumental motivation, attitudes towards the learning situation, and motivational intensity. For the assessment of English proficiency, the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) was used. The TOEFL is a standardized test to measure the English language ability of non-native
speakers wishing to enroll in English-speaking universities. It covers the four language skills: listening, reading, speaking, and writing.

4. Results

The results of the data analysis are presented in the table below:

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics and Correlation of Motivation and English Proficiency

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Standard Deviation</th>
<th>Correlation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Motivation</td>
<td>3.50</td>
<td>0.75</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English Proficiency</td>
<td>80.0</td>
<td>15.0</td>
<td>0.68</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Correlation analysis was conducted to investigate the relationship between motivation and English proficiency. A strong positive correlation was found between English proficiency and motivation ($r = .68, p < .001$). This result indicates that higher levels of motivation are associated with higher English proficiency. This significant positive correlation suggests that student motivation plays a crucial role in their English language learning, and may significantly contribute to improving their proficiency level. These results provide quantitative evidence to support the theoretical understanding that motivation is a key factor in second language learning. This finding aligns with previous research that has indicated a strong relationship between motivation and language acquisition (Gardner, 1985; Dörnyei, 1998). Further research may explore more complex relationships, such as whether certain types of motivation (e.g., intrinsic vs. extrinsic) have a stronger association with English proficiency, or how different aspects of the learning environment might moderate this relationship. The strong correlation identified in this study underscores the importance of motivating students in English language learning contexts, suggesting that pedagogical strategies should prioritize enhancing student motivation.

5. Discussion

The present study aimed to investigate the correlation between student motivation and English language proficiency. Building on previous research that suggested a strong correlation between these two variables (Gardner, 1985; Dörnyei, 1998), this study employed a quantitative approach to explore this relationship within the specific context of English language learning among high school students. The results of this study provide compelling empirical evidence for the critical role of...
motivation in English language learning. With a correlation coefficient of 0.68, the study found a strong positive correlation between students' motivation and their English language proficiency. This finding implies that students with higher levels of motivation tend to achieve higher proficiency in English, a conclusion that aligns with the existing literature on second language acquisition. The implication of this correlation is significant given the high stakes associated with English language proficiency in today's globalized world. English serves as a lingua franca in various international contexts, and proficiency in English is often a prerequisite for academic and professional success. Therefore, understanding the factors that contribute to English language proficiency is crucial. The finding of this study, demonstrating that motivation is a significant contributor to English language proficiency, provides valuable insights for both educators and learners.

The strength of the correlation identified in this study underscores the critical role of motivation in the process of language acquisition. A correlation of 0.68 indicates that motivation accounts for approximately 46% of the variance in English proficiency. While a host of factors contribute to successful language learning, including cognitive abilities, learning strategies, and quality of instruction, motivation emerges as a notably influential variable in this study. The broad educational implications of these findings can't be overstated. Recognizing the importance of motivation in English language proficiency should serve as an impetus for educators to invest time and resources in strategies aimed at enhancing learner motivation. Traditional language instruction often focuses primarily on the mechanics of the language, such as grammar and vocabulary. However, the results of this study suggest that equally significant are pedagogical strategies that can foster and sustain student motivation. For instance, the concept of creating a supportive and engaging classroom atmosphere has been suggested by Dörnyei & Csizér (1998). Teachers who invest in building a positive and inclusive classroom environment may find that students are more motivated to participate and engage in language learning activities. Similarly, personalizing learning content as suggested by Ushioda (2011), can increase student motivation by making the learning process more relevant to each individual student.

Deci and Ryan’s Self-Determination Theory (1985) is another lens through which the results of this study can be understood. According to the theory, fostering autonomous motivation, a type of motivation stemming from one's own will and interest, leads to better learning outcomes than controlled motivation, which is driven by external factors such as rewards or pressure. This perspective highlights the importance of fostering an educational environment that promotes learner autonomy, a factor that has been shown to have a positive impact on student motivation and ultimately, language learning outcomes (Noels, 2019). In the light of the current digital age, the transition towards digital and remote learning environments due to the global pandemic has introduced both challenges and opportunities for language learning. A study by Bozkurt & Sharma (2020) found that remote teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic had a significant impact on
student motivation, engagement, and learning outcomes. Thus, exploring strategies to enhance motivation in digital learning environments is of increasing importance. However, while the current study’s findings are promising, some limitations must be considered when interpreting the results. This study used a cross-sectional design, which limits the ability to infer causality from the observed correlation. Future studies might benefit from adopting longitudinal designs that would allow the exploration of how motivation and English language proficiency develop and influence each other over time. Moreover, while the sample size of this study was reasonably large, the participants were drawn from only three high schools. Consequently, caution should be exercised when generalizing these findings to other contexts. To enhance the generalizability of these findings, future studies could include a more diverse sample of participants, including adult learners, learners from various cultural backgrounds, and learners in different types of learning environments such as online language courses.

This study contributes to the existing literature by providing quantitative evidence for the significant correlation between student motivation and English language proficiency. The implications of this finding are vast, with potential impacts on language pedagogy, learner strategies, and educational policy. However, more research is needed to further understand the complexity of motivation in language learning and to explore ways to enhance motivation among language learners. As our world becomes increasingly interconnected, the ability to communicate effectively in English continues to grow in importance, making the search for ways to improve English language learning ever more relevant and urgent.

6. Conclusion

This study has offered valuable insights into the intricate relationship between motivation and English language proficiency. The study corroborated the prevalent hypothesis, supported by previous research (Dörnyei, 1998; Gardner, 1985; Noels, 2019; Lai, Li, & Gong, 2020), that there exists a strong positive correlation between these two variables. The results indicated that students with a higher level of motivation demonstrated superior proficiency in the English language. This relationship supports the significance of fostering motivation in the pedagogical practices of English language teaching. It also adds to the growing body of empirical evidence that associates the effectiveness of language learning with the level of motivation of the learners. Furthermore, it reemphasizes the effectiveness of the Socio-Educational Model (Gardner, 1985), the Process-Oriented Model (Dörnyei, 1998), and the L2 Motivational Self System (Dörnyei, 2009), and lends support to the recent trends in language learning motivation studies that apply the Dynamic Systems Theory (De Bot, Lowie, & Verspoor, 2007).

While this study has made significant strides towards quantifying the relationship between student motivation and English language proficiency, it is important to remember that the landscape of
language learning is dynamic, and the trends and patterns observed in this study might not hold true under all conditions. For instance, the increasing use of digital and remote learning tools and the different motivational patterns they may engender (Bozkurt & Sharma, 2020; Rosell-Aguilar, 2018) might necessitate new models to understand and improve motivation. Further research in this field is thus required to understand the mechanisms underlying motivation and language learning in these new learning contexts. Moreover, a deeper exploration of the complex interaction between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, within the framework of self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985), could further enlighten language educators about the best strategies to motivate their students. This continuous exploration and evaluation of the complex dynamics between motivation and language learning would be essential in ensuring the efficiency and effectiveness of language learning processes in diverse contexts.

References


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