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## The Role of Motivation in English Language Learning: An Evaluation of the Correlation between Student Motivation and Proficiency in English

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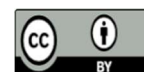


### Abstract

The study seeks to test how student motivation interacts with English language skills among high school students. From the seminal models of motivation by Gardner's Socio-Educational Model to Dörnyei's Process-Oriented Model, and from L2 Motivational Self System to the contemporary Dynamic Systems Theory, it has been critically postulated that language learning takes off from motivation. The total number of 450 students aged 16-18, then completing the modified form of the Attitude/Motivation Test Battery (AMTB), their level of proficiency in English defined on the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL). The result thus established a strong positive relationship between motivation and English proficiency ( $r = 0.68$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), supporting the point that high motivation, in general, can indeed translate into better proficiency in a language. This study, therefore, as it provides even more strengthening of the need to promote motivation in English language teaching, avails great insights for educators and researchers within a continuously dynamic language-learning environment.

### KEYWORDS

*Motivation, English language learning, language proficiency, correlation, self-determination theory*



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## Introduction

Learning English as a second or foreign language (ESL/EFL) presents a myriad of challenges to students worldwide. Student motivation has been a very well cited pivotal determinant of the success rate in language learning (Gardner, 1985; Dörnyei, 1998), among other factors for effective language acquisition. Over the recent past, much research has been done in this field to the extent that a very solid relationship between student motivation and language proficiency has been brought out. The latter holds, since there is no comprehensive research that further outlines this relationship, especially in the context of English language learning. The concept of motivation to the domain of language learning has been taken up very much for plenty of research work with reference to varied theoretical perspectives, including the socio-educational model of Gardner (1985) and the process-oriented model by Dörnyei (1998). These seminal works have provided strong frameworks to know how motivation influences the competence of the language. However, the extent to which they can be generalised and applied across different learning environments, particularly given that there is rapid momentum in the incorporation of digital and remote modes of learning, requires further investigation. With this gap in the literature, the principal aim of the

study is to conduct an in-depth quantitative investigation into the correlation that exists between motivation and proficiency in the English language among students. As such, the study would hope to validate or challenge findings in prior research in order to contribute toward an overall understanding of effective language learning strategy. It is against this background that the present study is guided by self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985), Further suggesting that the nature of motivation is as important as its quantity when considering the effects of intrinsic and autonomously oriented extrinsic forms of motivation. This means, therefore, that the research paper will apply the theory of motivation, as an analytic tool arguing, to better understand the motivational dynamics present in the process of learning the English language. In this view, the present research also takes a quantitative approach to postulate an ascribable correlation between motivation and language proficiency, hence giving room for some empirical insights over the subject and some founding on which to base practical pedagogical intervention in language education. Findings of this study, therefore, could also give a hint to the educators on how best to design and implement effective teaching strategies and environments towards promoting learner motivation and, thus, improving English language competence among learners.

Learning English as an ESL/EFL second or foreign language is a multidimensional process that includes many challenges and has many factors that lead to effective or ineffective learning. Thus, a major consideration and factor lie in the role played by student motivation, since this has a major bearing on success (Gardner, 1985; Dörnyei, 1998). This has drawn the scholarly attention of researchers to this language learning connection to motivation, which has now brought a rich body of literature. The most recent scholarship has advanced the powerful influence of motivation over language learning and acquisition, since it consistently reports that motivation and language skills are positively correlated (MacIntyre et al., 2019; Wang and Derakhshan, 2021). However, most of these studies had employed a qualitative research paradigm, while the great lack of a full quantitative analysis is still felt in the spectrum of the learning of the English language.

The motivation that comes to sustain language learning has been quite a focused subject of research over the past few years. The Socio-Educational Model of Gardner (1985) and the Process-Oriented Model of Dörnyei (1998) were quite innovative at that time in the sense of being the very first step for understanding how motivation could influence in the process of learning language. Dörnyei (2009) presents some of the more recent theoretical proposals that contribute to specifying this component of his model: L2 Motivational Self System and De Bot, Lowie, and Verspoor (2007) Dynamic Systems Theory perspective. However, through new learning environments and spaces brought in by digital and remote learning technologies, it is with their advent that more reasons to conduct research in this area are surfacing (Bozkurt & Sharma, 2020; Rosell-Aguilar, 2018). It is against this background that this paper seeks to plug this gap in the existing literature with a comprehensive quantitative analysis of the relationship that exists between student motivation and proficiency in English. Thus, confirming or questioning earlier research findings, this would be part of a larger discourse on effective language learning strategies and techniques. The self-determination theory of Deci and Ryan (1985) is a psychological framework that emphasizes

intrinsic motivation, along with its relevance, together with the significance of being intrinsically motivated by autonomous forms of extrinsic motivation for human behavior and learning. Its application has recently and increasingly been extended to educational contexts, and its relevance and applicability have been found in language learning with current research (Noels, 2019; Lai et al., 2020). This research will, therefore, adopt an absolutely quantitative approach in its attempt to define a clear, measurable relationship between motivation and language proficiency, so as to offer findings valuable for empirically supporting pedagogical strategies for ESL/EFL. The findings of this study could form a basis for educators in the development of learning environments more successful in enhancing motivation among learners and subsequently leading to improved English language competence among learners.

### **Literature Review**

In the last few years, the concept of motivation to learn English has been conceptualised under very many theoretical perspectives. Among the most salient in the field is the Socio-Educational Model by Gardner (1985). The next model stipulates that motivation in language learning is not the driving force that people feel for achieving something in particular but a source that has an attitude of liking towards the target language community. The above model of Gardner underscores the concept of "integrativeness," whereby he meant a learner's intrinsic interest in and their positive attitudes towards the target language community. Such a model has offered substantial grounds to prompt motivational understandings in language learning, and its implications are currently vastly found to be valid in dissimilar learning contexts (Masgoret & Gardner, 2003; Papi & Abdollahzadeh, 2012). While the Socio-Educational Model established the basic grounds in connection with the role of motivation in language learning, further models sought to refine that notion even further. Dörnyei's Process-Oriented Model (1998) came along with three clearly different phases of the motivation concept: a preactional, an actional, and finally a postactional stage. This model draws attention to the dynamic nature of motivation and how susceptible it is to change under the influence of various factors at various stages of the language acquisition process (Dörnyei & Otto, 1998). Dörnyei went further and refined this model with the new L2 Motivational Self System (2009), combining perspectives from psychological theories of the self. The three components of the L2 Motivational Self System include the Ideal L2 Self, the Ought-to L2 Self, and the L2 Learning Experience. This motivational model has been applied to a wide range of recent research on language learning (Taguchi et al., 2009; Ryan & Dörnyei, 2013). The other very significant development is that of the use of Dynamic System Theory (DST) in viewing motivation in language learning. De Bot, Lowie, and Verspoor (2007) particularly emphasise that among key questions that decided to determine language learning, one is motivation, understood as a complex dynamic system, involving more than one variable. The viewpoint from DST suggests that motivation cannot be a static entity; it rather keeps on developing and interacts with other things present in the system. These are perspectives that are newly subjected to research in the context of language learning. Recently, these are the

perspectives that have been subjected to research within the context of language learning (Wang & Derakhshan, 2021; Lowie, Verspoor & Seton, 2021).

The self-determination theory has also led to the learning of language under the light of self-determination theory (SDT). Developed by Deci and Ryan (1985), the theory of self-determination makes a distinction among different motivations in terms of their degree of autonomy. The theory postulates that forms of motivation to self-determination, such as intrinsic motivation and integrated regulation, result in better learning outcomes than such forms of motivation that are controlled and instilled with outside determinants, like external regulation. Furthermore, some most recent studies show empirical evidence of the relevance of the SDT to language learning (Noels, 2019; Lai, Li, and Gong, 2020). Most of all, it indicated from these studies that autonomy support and an autonomous teaching style are necessary to allow one's autonomous motivating drive and learning of the language. The evolving context of digital and remote learning settings over the past years has brought in another stream of challenges and opportunities for language learning motivation. Researchers have now started drilling into how far this application of technology in language learning is empowering motivation (Bozkurt & Sharma, 2020; Rosell-Aguilar, 2018). For example, Bozkurt and Sharma (2020) point out that within the conditions of the COVID-19 pandemic, the teaching process in distance mode conditions has an extremely important impact on both student motivation and involvement in the educational process. This is consistent with the view of Rosell-Aguilar (2018), who focuses on the role of mobile applications in language learning and establishes that these bring high motivational benefits for learners by permitting learners to face personalised and engaging learning. However, with the state-of-the-art focus that these studies are going to put across on motivation and its role, relatively comprehensive quantitative research is needed in the context of the English language. This paper adds to this shortage by trying to probe the relationship of student motivation with English language proficiency using a quantitative paradigm. The motivation for second language learning in students has a very important role in English language learning, and there is very much need to understand it. Gardner's Socio-Educational Model (1985) helps in understanding how motivation in the learning of language has come about. It points to the fact that acquisition leading to success is not purely driven by the desire to reach a set goal but also calls for a positive attitude towards the members of the target language community. One of the important factors introduced in relation to this is the concept of 'integrativeness', under which the interest and positive attitude of a learner towards the target language community greatly affect his motivation for learning the language.

The Socio-Educational Model by Gardner, in principle with the Integrativeness, has been quite a subject in many research works across different cultural backgrounds. In these studies, it has been demonstrated how the model has widely been applied and relevant within the cultural and geographical contexts of most of the studied areas (Masgoret & Gardner, 2003; Papi & Abdollahzadeh, 2012). This has, however, been a strong foothold in which further motivational models have been developed despite criticisms. In the development of research within this specific field, the theoretical understanding towards motivation in language learning also developed. One

of such developments was Dörnyei's Process-Oriented Model (1998), which added a dynamic and temporal dimension to the construct. The outlined model of motivation had three stages: the preactional stage when goal-oriented expectations or intentions are formulated, the actional stage when motivation interplays with experiences of learning, and the postactional stage where retrospective self-appraisals determine future motivation. This model of the dynamic and changing nature of motivation was a building block to understand how motivation changes with time and is affected by a myriad of different factors throughout the language learning journey (Dörnyei & Otto, 1998).

Later building on from his Process-Oriented Model, Dörnyei developed the L2 Motivational Self System (2009), integrating notions from psychological theories of the self. This system formulated three constituents: the Ideal L2 Self, which refers to the image of the self second language competent; the Ought-to L2 Self, capturing the attributes that one believes the self should possess in order to avoid negative outcomes or meet expectations; and the L2 Learning Experience, referring to the situated, 'here-and-now' effect of the learning environment on motivation. More recent motivation research in the language learning field echoes this perspective (e.g., Taguchi et al., 2009; Ryan et al., 2013). This provides a detailed description of the motivational dynamics. A noteworthy perspective on language learning and motivation has been provided by the Dynamic Systems Theory (DST). De Bot, Lowie, and Verspoor (2007) have even proposed that motivation is among the key variables of language learning, looked upon as part of a complex dynamic system, making the given elements manifold and fluctuating in time.

DST also clearly indicates that motivation is not a constant element but that it appears and does not exist independently as a part of other elements of the system, reflecting the systemic property of language learning. (Wang and Derakhshan, 2021; Lowie et al., 2021; Verspoor et al., 2021) While its appearance dates only from the 1990s, Self-Determination Theory (SDT; Deci and Ryan, 1985) has been employed relatively rarely in the parallel line of inquiry on language learning motivation. SDT differentiates the degree of autonomy of motivations. This means that the autonomous motivation would bring along better performance outcomes in learning than the controlled motivation, such as the external regulation. In light of this, SDT has been used to derive or explain the experiences of engaging in language learning in recent research, and the relevance has been supported through indicating that autonomous, supported teaching is central to engendering the characteristic autonomous motivation and excellence in proficiency (Noels, 2019; Lai et al., 2020).

A dimension of challenges and possibilities for the motivation of language learning added in recent years through the growing digitisation of education. With the introduction of educational technology and learning environments, much research interest has followed in its impact on motivation for language learning (Bozkurt & Sharma, 2020; Rosell-Aguilar, 2018). Research has shown that technologies like mobile applications support motivation through the enrichment of learning experiences with personalisation (Rosell-Aguilar, 2018). Second, the motivation, engagement, and learning achievement among students were some of the enormous determinants

of the emergency shift to distance teaching following the onset of COVID-19 (Bozkurt & Sharma, 2020). However, a comprehensive quantitative investigation, in the purview of learning English, is still to be carried out, even though previous research works have revealed valuable insights into the complex relationship that exists between motivation and language learning. In the background of this horizon of research, this paper seeks to fill this gap and see a relationship between student motivation and English language proficiency through robust quantitative research. The insights derived from the task will deepen the way motivation is understood, in the multifaceted sense of learning the English language, and encourage effective pedagogical practice.

In fact, motivation within the second language (L2) learning setting has been an amounting body for attention and research over the past few years—a few decades—which seems to signal its huge relevance for successful acquisition of the target language. The following paper will discuss Noels et al.'s (2000) groundbreaking work of integrating Self-Determination Theory (SDT) with L2 learning motivation and compare and contrast it with the models of traditional times that have been adopted, apparently like a shadow, and become the dominant perspective on the matter.

### ***Self-Determination Theory and Language Learning***

Self-determination theory, as outlined by Deci and Ryan (1985), motivates intrinsically—motivation is considered a finer grain of motivation between intrinsic and extrinsic. Intrinsic motivation is considered the type of motivation to carry out an activity from its inherent aspects and can be provoked by competing needs and autonomy. Vallerand et al. (1992) further refined this concept by describing subtypes of the intrinsic motivation: Knowledge, Accomplishment, and Stimulation, each of them being related to satisfaction in learning, achievement, and sensory pleasures coming from the activity, respectively. Extrinsic motivation involves such kind of behaviour in order to obtain the extrinsic rewards. Deci and Ryan (1985) developed a continuum of extrinsic motivation from external regulation through introjected and identified regulation to integrated regulation, which was said to indicate increasing levels of internalisation and self-determination. Noels et al. (2000) argue that SDT is an appropriate framework for the understanding of the intricate language learning motivations. Being a bilingual institution, all students had to identify their second-language proficiency. University of Ottawa seemed a great pick to engage in the empirical investigation of the applicability of SDT. This study developed an instrument to assess the various subtypes of motivation within the language-learning context reliably and probed the relationships of the motivational types to language-learning orientations that had been postulated by Clément and Kruidenier (1983).

### ***Empirical Findings and Theoretical Implications***

These orientations are found to have a positive relationship to extrinsic regulation; that is, they conform to high congruence with extrinsic motivation. On the contrary, the correlation values of travel, friendship, and knowledge orientations with identified regulation and intrinsic motivation are high. They thus, allude to the dialectical possibility of interactions. This would once more support the use of SDT as an instrument in making interpretations of the psychological processes

in which language learning motivation takes place. However, these theorists suggest that differences in the motivation to learn any language are derived from the extent of feeling autonomy, competence, and relatedness being offered in the environment of learning a language. Moreover, the empirical power of prediction and associated strength with this theory tends to unveil valuable insight into the application of the principles of language and program development.

### ***Comparative Analysis with Traditional Motivational Models***

Noels et al.'s work (2000) has been one of the researches making a critical view possible on traditionally conceived L2 motivational models, with a special focus on the integrative-instrumental dichotomy originally postulated by Gardner and Lambert (1959, 1972). While there were of course worthwhile features in those older models, Noels et al. have argued that SDT does offer a more systematic and theoretically based framework for making sense of language learning motivation. This perspective not only reframes L2 learning with new syntheses but re-examines the motivating orientations' underpinnings for all stakeholders, i.e., researchers and educators.

### **Methodology**

This was a cross-sectional survey of a quantitative nature. The study sample was made up of 450 students ranging in age from 16 to 18 years, randomly drawn from three different high schools. The sample size was therefore determined on the basis of practicability, which was assumed from the sample sizes of previous researches that had been carried out in second language acquisition. Participants were required to respond to the Motivation section of the 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 includes several areas of motivation, such as integrative and instrumental, motivation intensity, attitudes toward the learning situation, among others. It was the English proficiency test—Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL). TOEFL is a standardised test that determines the ability of English in students whose native language is not English but would like to study in English-speaking universities. It covers the four language skills: listening, reading, speaking, and writing."

### **Results**

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

**Table 1**

Descriptive Statistics and Correlation of Motivation and English Proficiency

<b>Variable</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Standard Deviation</b>	<b>Correlation</b>
<b>Motivation</b>	3.50	0.75	
<b>English Proficiency</b>	80.0	15.0	0.68



This has been done to establish the relationship that exists between the motivational factor and the proficiency level of English. From the analysis, it is evident there is a positive, strong correlation at a significant level between English proficiency and motivation ( $r = .68, p < .001$ ). It was shown that if the level of motivation increased, the level of English proficiency would also increase. The strong positive correlation has shown the importance of students' motivation to their learning of the English language and was a very important variable that will pay a great deal in raising their proficiency level. These results put into quantifiable terms what theories of second language learning have long posited: Motivation is indeed powerfully supported. This finding coincides with the research that has been done in the past, showing a very strong association between motivation and language learning (Gardner, 1985; Dörnyei, 1998). Future research might explore these more complex relationships—such as whether there are certain types of motivations (e.g., intrinsic vs. extrinsic) that have a stronger relation with English proficiency, or even how different aspects of the learning environment might moderate this relationship. This strong relation evidenced between the two highlights the importance that student motivation plays in an English pedagogical context and therefore provides a need for pedagogical approaches to highlight motivation.

### Discussion

The present study aimed to investigate the correlation between student motivation and English language proficiency. Accordingly, this study—through its quantitative research design—builds upon previous research that found a strong relationship between them (Gardner, 1985; Dörnyei, 1998), to probe the given relationship within the setting and study level in question. The findings of this research provide very strong empirical evidence that bring to light the indispensable role of motivation in learning the English language. Most students who have high motivation portray a very positive strong relationship with proficiency in the English language at 0.68 with a correlation coefficient. That would mean that high proficiency in English would be reached only by highly motivated students, among other things. That brings into perspective a conclusion that reflects what literature supports regarding acquisition of a second language. The implication of this relation to the extremely high stakes attached to English language proficiency in a globalised world today is quite immense. English is the language of the lingua franca in international and other contexts, and the competence of English is usually a prerequisite for access to the world of academia or profession. This, therefore, implies that there is an importance of understanding the determinants of English language proficiency. The understanding of the great determinants of English language proficiency is, therefore, an availing of valuable insights that can be used by educators and learners.

This shows the strength of the identified relationship, which is exemplified by the role that motivation plays in language acquisition. A correlation of 0.68, therefore, means that motivation contributes to approximately 46% of the variance in English proficiency. Different elements ranging from cognitive aptitude, learning strategies, quality of instruction, etc., all coalesce for successful language acquisition, motivation seems to be one of the most effective variables in this purview. The general educational significance of the findings cannot be overemphasised. Realisation of this importance to the development of English language proficiency should be a

motivational factor to warrant educators' investment of time and resources in those strategies of teaching that aim for the enhancement of learner motivation. Traditional language teaching will usually focus mainly on the mechanics of the language, such as grammar and vocabulary. This study's findings suggest pedagogical strategies that have an equally strong significance for strategies that would improve and keep pace with the motivation of students. For example, Dörnyei and Csizér (1998) have proposed the idea of creating a supportive and motivating class atmosphere. If teachers were to invest in setting up a classroom with a positive and inclusive environment, they might have higher returns through the high motivation and active involvement in language learning activities of the students. Similarly, Ushioda (2011) advocated that learning content should be personal to the learner in order to enhance the latter's motivation to learn by having a feeling of being relevant to the learner's need.

Looking through the lenses of Deci and Ryan's Self-Determination Theory (1985), the following would be a different interpretation of the findings of this study. It is not surprising that, from the perspective of this theory, autonomous motivation, originating from one's own will and interest, creates much better outcomes in learning than controlled motivation, made up of the administration of rewards or pressure. Therefore, it results in such an educational environment that develops the autonomy of learners, which is a condition contributing to student motivation and, in turn, indubitably affecting language learning outcomes in a positive way (Noels, 2019). The digital age lens through which the world pandemic has transitioned toward digital and distance learning spaces opens new opportunities and problems concerning language learning. For example, the recent study of Bozkurt & Sharma (2020) is one of those researches in which the authors claim that there is a strong effect of teaching with the help of distance learning during the current COVID-19 outbreak on students' motivation and involvement, as well as on learning achievements. So, even more than before, it is vital to find the ways that could help increase motivation in digital learning environments. While highly promising, the present study is beset by a number of limits that one has to take into account when generalising the implications of the present results to other settings. This being the case, the present research incurs a limitation in its design. Future research may take the form of longitudinal designs in order to establish how motivation develops and influences the development of proficiency in English over time. The sample size in this study was quite large. The participants of this research drew from only three high schools, thus caution should be warranted in generalising the findings to other contexts. The present study, of course, is limited in its scope only to the convenience sample of university students. In the future, if a larger sample size and more diverse sample groups, such as adult learners, learners from different cultural backgrounds, learners from other parts of the world, and distance language courses are included, it may enhance the generalisability of the findings.

This is a new quantitative evidence from the literature that there is a significant correlation between the motivation of students and their proficiency in the English language. The implications of such a finding are too far-reaching and would be pronounced in the areas where concern is for language pedagogy, learner strategies, and educational policy. However, further study should expound more

on the complexity of motivation in language learning, so as to find out how motivation can be enhanced amongst language learners. The more the world interconnects, the more important it is for human beings to communicate well in English, and hence relevant and urgent ways are sought in which to better English language learning.

### Conclusion

It gives valuable insight into the intricate relationship between motivation and English language proficiency. This study further reconfirmed a very common assumption supported by previous research (Dörnyei, 1998; Gardner, 1985; Noels, 2019; Lai, Li, & Gong, 2020) that there is high positive correlation between the two. The results showed that students who were highly motivated indeed had high proficiency in English. Such kind of association upholds the importance of motivation in the pedagogical practices that the English language teachers use. This also adds to the ever-increasing body of empirical evidence that links effectiveness in language learning to the level of motivation of learners. Therefore, it sustains that the Socio-Educational Model (Gardner, 1985), the Process-Oriented Model (Dörnyei, 1998), and the L2 Motivational Self System (Dörnyei, 2009) remain forceful against the prevailing winds in the investigation of language learning motivation towards the side of the Dynamic Systems Theory (De Bot, Lowie, & Verspoor, 2007). Although this does go a long way toward putting numbers to the actual relationship between student motivation and English language proficiency, it should be noted that the landscape of language learning is one that is continually shifting. Trends and patterns quantified by the study may not hold well under all conditions. Digital and distance learning affordances deal with an ever-increasing number of available and used tools for teaching that produce different motivational patterns (Bozkurt & Sharma, 2020; Rosell-Aguilar, 2018). That is, the latter can even demand new models of motivational understanding and enhancement. Thus, further research in this area is required to understand the motivation mechanisms and language learning taking place in the new learning context. At the same time, further research into the complex connection between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation through the self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985) is highly encouraged, as it may throw further light on language educators to ensure the best ways of motivating their students. In addition, above all, this continued quest and evaluation of the delicate dynamics between the motivation and language learning would be very helpful to secure the efficacy and effectiveness of the language learning processes in such diverse contexts.

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