

Original Paper

Learning Motivation for English Language Learners

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Abstract

Motivation is a key factor in influencing the success of English language learners (ELLs). It is shaping how they engage, persist, and invest in their language and academic development. This literature review will explore motivation, particularly through the ideas of the self-determination theory (SDT), and how it will support ELL growth in an academic and language learning setting. SDT emphasizes the importance of autonomy, competence, and relatedness while fostering intrinsic motivation. When these psychological needs are met, ELLs are more likely to experience learning through meaningful opportunities, confidence, and academic success. The review discusses intrinsic and extrinsic forms of motivation, while examining how both are beneficial when used in a balanced way. Additionally, it discusses the effects of practicing scaffolding, promoting autonomy, and building positive teacher student rapport. All these motivate ELL students to be ready for the academic and language learning world. Implementing strategies grounded in motivational theory can create an inclusive classroom where all students feel valued, supported, and empowered.

Introduction

Motivation plays a pivotal role in students who are ELLs because it influences whether learners begin, sustain, and invest effort into their long-term language development. For ELLs, motivation is multifaceted as it attaches to their needs, self-concept, and sociocultural identities. It is all a part of the classroom practices that can shape their motivation and what they need to succeed. Self-Determination Theory explains that human motivation is when the fulfillment of three basic psychological needs autonomy, competence, and relatedness are met (Wang et al., 2023). When these needs are met, students are more likely to become intrinsically motivated and engage in their learning along with participating in meaningful experiences and not expect some type of reward (Kaiser, 2024). For English language learners SDT offers framework for understanding how to foster motivation in a classroom. ELL students face challenges, such as language barriers, cultural adjustments, and lower confidence in academic tasks. Teachers can enhance their motivation by promoting their autonomy through student choice, relevant activities, and supporting competence with clear expectations, scaffolding, and feedback. This can be achieved by creating a classroom that celebrates all students and their diverse backgrounds (Meng, 2021). When teachers address these needs of ELL students, they are more likely to feel confident and motivated to participate actively in their learning. This can promote personal growth and goals being met.

What is learning motivation

Motivation, the thing some people struggle with the most. Motivation to do homework, motivation to write a literature review, and even motivation to learn. The question is what the best way is to become motivated and stay motivated and how can teachers promote this within their classrooms (Pintrich, 2003). When it comes to the first days of school, young learners respond so quickly because in the first days of the school year they focus so intently on procedures and routines, and they practice them until they get it right. In combination of practice at the beginning of the year and continuing to follow procedures, young students become conditioned to do without hesitation when asked. It takes practice and patience to master the skill of listening and motivation to become students ready and capable of learning. All that time really pays off when students are motivated to do what is best and what they are asked. It takes a teacher to model motivation and expectations before students can become motivated and meet expectations. Teachers need to know these strategies in order to help and encourage their students in the teaching process. So, what is learning motivation? Learning motivation is recognized as a crucial factor

in student learning outcomes, what is influencing attention, persistence, and performance (Schunk et al., 2014). Motivation for learning is formed in the classroom where students are given the opportunity to learn and begin to love what they are learning.

Learning motivation is simply defined as the internal drive or desire to engage in pursuit and succeed in the learning process (Liu et al., 2025). It is the driving factor in determining why students choose to learn, how much effort they want to put into their learning, what they are learning, and how long they can put into their effort when challenges may arise. Motivation can be intrinsic, coming from a genuine interest or enjoyment in the learning experience, or extrinsic, where there are outside rewards such as grades, praise or approval, and even tangible items. In education, fostering learning motivation is essential because it influences students to become engaged in the learning process. Students may even begin to show excitement for achievements and long-term growth. Teachers play a pivotal role in creating a learner that is motivated through developing a supportive environment where students can feel competent, valued, and connected. When students understand why they are learning something and why it is important, they will start to understand the concepts and become motivated to learn those ideas, to view motivation as malleable and influenced by the learning environment (Pintrich, 2003). Hence, success and motivation increase. Teachers should lead students to develop a deeper understanding of what they're learning, and they may become lifelong learners.

Intrinsic vs. Extrinsic

According to SDT, multiple types of motivation can occur (Johansen et al., 2023). Motivating young learners can be difficult because their attention and ability is not the same as adults or even older students. Although young learners cannot differentiate between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, it is important to understand the difference between the two (Kaiser, 2024). Intrinsically motivated people are self-motivated and do things because it is meaningful to them. Extrinsically motivated people are driven by external reinforcers. Motivational processes give light to behaviors that enrich human experience (Morris et al., 2022). Motivation is and will probably always be something students struggle with. When it comes to motivation and determining if a student is motivated, it is important to note whether the motivation is coming from within, intrinsic, or from some external source, extrinsic.

Intrinsically motivated students will gravitate more towards learning based on their innate curiosity, which is the ultimate autonomous motivation (Johansen et al., 2023). Intrinsic motivation is essential to education because it relates to the ideas of learning for personal gain and interest. For students to move towards the idea of intrinsic motivation, it is essential to provide support for their basic psychological needs. Those three needs are autonomy, competence, and relatedness. SDT identifies strategies to support students and related to their psychological needs. Autonomy is a sense of ownership in the learning environment. This can be supported through providing choice and using language that doesn't come off as harsh or controlling. Competence is a sense of capability and knowing that one can be successful in learning and understanding (Kaiser, 2024). Teachers can support this by giving positive feedback, providing challenges, and designing meaningful learning experiences that push students to be motivated and thrive. Lastly, relatedness is a sense of connection and belonging. Students need to feel welcome in their learning environment to have the most optimal learning experiences where they are developing their basic skills and learning how to be a motivated learner (Wang et al., 2023).

In contrast, Extrinsic motivation occurs when a student is engaging in the learning task and receives an external reward such as grades, praise, prize, or teacher approval. The rewards originate from beyond the person (Kaiser, 2024). It can be a powerful tool when encouraging participation and effort, especially if students are disengaged or lack confidence in a subject. Rewards and recognition can help students develop positive habits, meet goals, and experience accomplishments (Cherry, 2024). Over relying on external rewards can reduce the opportunities for students to become intrinsically motivated. This will cause students to focus more on the reward and less on what they are learning. Offering an excessive number of rewards can lead to a lack of motivation (Cherry 2024). If students become only extrinsically motivated, they will lack the desire to learn new concepts. Once a reward is removed, the motivation may fade, and students will be less likely to engage in the learning and be unsatisfied when it comes time to engage in the learning process. While extrinsic motivation is an effective short term motivation tactic, it works best when it is used thoughtfully and is paired with strategies to help build the students, intrinsic

motivation, self-confidence, and interest in learning. Young children are strongly motivated by reinforcement and respond well to it because they are still developing self-regulation and how to be in the school environment. For example, using positive reinforcement, such as verbal praise, stickers, or choice time encourages young students to repeat desired behaviors. Also, when students lose out on something after a negative behavior it helps to decrease undesired behaviors in a clear and consistent way. Operant conditioning allows teachers to shape behavior and build classroom routines to shape academic and emotional growth. Operant conditioning is effective for young learners because it directly connects to the development and needs of young learners. Young students thrive on immediate feedback and praise. For example, if a teacher forgets to give one student a sticker for good work, they take that deep often followed by tears. When it is constant and consistent, they make connections better to what behavior was rewarded, and they are more likely to repeat and continue the behavior.

When teachers utilize both strategies of motivation, extrinsic and intrinsic within their classroom, it can influence students to become more intrinsically motivated (Morris et al., 2022). Intrinsically for young learners, their motivation has to be developed through praise for good behavior, neat work, and following classroom procedures without being reminded. This is so beneficial because it helps students to be accountable for their actions. They begin to feel proud when they get a 100 on their assignment, when they are behaving well, and getting acknowledgement. This is also a great behavior management tool because students want to be like their peers and when they see their classmates being praised, they automatically want to be a part of that, and that is when they are motivated within themselves to do better. Extrinsic motivation can be done with young learners through receiving a token for good behavior can be a physical reminder for the students. The token can be used as an incentive for good behavior throughout the day and week. At the end of the week, they get to “spend” their tokens in a classroom store. This is a physical object that indicates how they have behaved this week. It also begins to teach them about money, value, and counting.

Motivational Theories

Motivational theories help us to understand where our students are and where they need to be. All learning theories, while vastly different, have one common concept, the competence of people. Competence is the idea of success, self-efficacy, confidence, and self-concept paired alongside the overarching question of “Can I do it?” (Cook et al., 2016). The Self-Determination Theory (SDT) argues that intrinsic motivation and strong extrinsic motivation are effective when a student’s basic psychological needs are met. SDT is a theory of human motivation that was later developed into a macro theory of human motivation and well-being SDT is widely applied to classrooms that other languages are being used to create autonomy within the student that is learning English as a second language (Wang et al., 2023).

SDT elaborates on the type of human behavior as well as the generation of human behavioral motivation. For many people it is necessary to learn the English language to be successful. People need to have the motivation to do so which is different between individuals. According to the SDT, when an individual’s basic needs are satisfied, their motivation to perform becomes self-determined. This creates a positive relationship between the behaviors and motivation (Wang et al., 2023). This includes the need for autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Under the satisfaction of autonomy, ELLs will voluntarily engage in activities that may require them to perform in the English language without fear of mistakes and failure (Alrabai, 2021). When their need for competence is satisfied, ELLs will be able to recognize their improvement in the foreign language. Relatedness points to the sense of belonging and the need for ELLs to care for and support their English language learning. The three psychological needs are interrelated and situation specific; they are also relevant in many different cultures but will differ from people and their specific learning situations. Once all three needs are met, learners will achieve self-development and experience positive effects while actively engaging in activities that may require them to use their second language skills.

Theories of a good language learner have been developed on the idea that language learners can choose which conditions they will interact with members of the target language community. Whereas they are immersed in a community, or they are given little to no choice when they can interact with the targeted language that they are learning. In second language acquisition, psychological factors associated with language can affect a person’s confidence in using a target language. Learning from mistakes and

practicing without judgement should be the focus. The theoretical investigation of these variables requires further clarification though. In a language learning environment, people have been under research, but some studies have not had a clear basis. (Liu et al., 2025) Teachers must do their best with what is in place to help ELLs and continue to develop strategies and an environment that is safe and comfortable for all students.

How can we support motivation within ELLs

ELLs benefit from intentional and instructional practices that address their academic, emotional, and language needs. We can support ELL students with intervention, teaching approaches, scaffolding, and building classroom relationships that show gains in self-determination and motivation. These methods not only strengthen language and content understanding but also promote motivation and determination. When teachers promote an environment of growth and comfort, ELLs are more likely to thrive academically and socially.

Motivating young ELL learners can be typically easy considering most wanting to be at school and have begun to love learning. School is where some of their favorite people are. Some ways that young learners are motivated are by peer acknowledgement, teacher praise, and incentives. Young students thrive on the acknowledgement that they have done well based on peer feedback. They love to cheer on and encourage each other. To instill a sense of pride, Teachers need to make sure to praise the students for work well done and I will also have them redo it if it is not correct and praise them once they have finally done what they are expected to do. Verbal encouragement is a big motivator for students to behave and work hard. Another form of motivation teachers can use in their class is extrinsic incentive motivation. Students receive a daily prize that they can use to purchase one prize at the end of the week. This is a wonderful way to remind students of their behavior and give them something to work on. It is also a great skill for understanding that items have value within our society.

When motivation is highly expressed it does not always lead to language progress while learners may be motivated, they might be reluctant to invest into learning a language if the classroom or social conditions devalue their identities (Darvin and Norton, 2021). It is crucial to build rapport and practical relationships between teachers and students so that they are encouraging communication climates in relation to the higher state of motivation in classroom engagement. Some teacher-based strategies that can help ELLs target the idea of building autonomy based on the teacher's autonomy. Positive teacher behaviors mediate the effect of creating support and motivation. Students build their autonomy when teachers take a step back and allow students to build on what they know or may want to know. It is the teacher's job to implement meaningful teaching opportunities that can allow all students to build autonomy, knowledge, and motivation.

Motivating ELLs requires strategies that build confidence, relevance, and connection. One effective approach is to incorporate students' cultures, language, and experiences into lessons. Helping them see the value of their identities in the learning process can motivate students to learn new languages and concepts. (Alarbia 2021) Providing a choice and voice like allowing them to select what they write when it comes to writing projects helps support autonomy and increases our overall engagement in the learning process. Allow them to be children and move towards learning based on their innate curiosity, which is the ultimate autonomous motivation (Johansen et al., 2023). Children are curious by default and should be able to explore and test what they have learned (Kaiser 2024).

Teachers need to work alongside students to set clear and achievable goals and celebrate the milestones that they may meet on the way to completing those goals. This can build a sense of competence and self-efficacy. Scaffolding instruction with visual supports, modeling and sentence frames ensure that English language learners can participate in meaningful learning experiences (Alrabai, 2021). Those experiences can lead to overall success in their language development and motivation, fostering peer collaboration through group work. Peer collaboration can promote a social connection that allows ELL to practice the language in an environment that is supportive and safe. Creating a safe, inclusive classroom climate is essential for students who are learning a new language. They need to feel like mistakes are viewed as a part of the learning process and help reduce anxiety when taking risks. When these strategies are all combined, ELL students can feel value-capability and are motivated to take ownership of what they are learning.

What are the best teaching strategies for ELLs

ELLs can thrive in a classroom where they feel supported, valued, and empowered to learn. Some ways to best support ELL students are through supporting their autonomy, scaffolding their instruction, and building a positive rapport. Building autonomy allows ELL students to take ownership of their own learning; scaffolding helps build on their learning, and having a positive rapport creates a safe motivating classroom. Together, these help ELL students develop confidence, language skills, and academic success.

Supporting autonomy can be seen through offering meaningful choices in tasks, letting students select topics, and connecting learning to their goals and identities. Developing the student and their idea of self-being is essential to do before you can even introduce the idea of motivation and what might motivate them. Based on the SDT, an investigation showed that some strategies are practical and have a positive effect on ELL learners' autonomy. Autonomy is perceived in a few ways but is widely recognized as the ability to make decisions, have independent action, and take charge of one's own learning based on the desire, ability and degree of freedom. Building autonomy makes teaching and learning a dynamic action where learners are responsible for aspects of their learning including planning, implementing, monitoring, and evaluating their own learning. (Alrabai, 2021). Autonomy support of language instruction reduces anxiety and increases the willingness to communicate and participate in classroom discussions. Helping develop learner-based strategies can increase their autonomy within the classroom. These strategies emphasize learner training, learning development, and granting learners the decision-making power in their learning within the classroom. The development of autonomy can be connected to making independent choices about student learning, taking part in course design, teacher support, encouraging, authentic use of English language in providing tools for reflection (Alrabai, 2021). The English language is a difficult concept to grasp and building motivation for people learning the English language is connected to one's autonomy while using the language and a strong self-identity to use it even if it is used incorrectly.

Scaffolding is an essential practice for ELLs because it provides structured support. ELLs to be able to access and understand new concepts along with learning a new language, scaffolding involves breaking down tasks into manageable steps, modeling expectations, and reducing assistance while gradually students will gain a sense of independence (Wang et al., 2023). This allows ELLs to participate in challenging academic activities without the feeling of anxiety. When it comes to the language barriers, teachers can scaffold activities and make content more comprehensible through using visual aids, sentence frames, graphic organizers, and hands-on learning activities. All these scaffolding techniques provide opportunities for guided practice and peer collaboration which helps students understand and build confidence. Scaffolding does not only support academic achievement, but it also allows students to feel a sense of competence and belonging. This encourages ELL students to take risks, ask questions, and engage in learning academically and while learning a new language.

Building rapport with English language learners is an essential step to fostering motivation and creating a positive classroom environment. When students know that their teacher loves and cares about them and their lives, they know school is a safe place where they can discover who they are and develop a sense of self and identity. School is where the teacher is a safe person. They can trust and build trust between the teacher and students, which is vital to them being responsive to what is expected for them to do. Rapport can help reinforce procedures when it is time to focus and learn. When teachers take the time to know their students, their learning backgrounds, interests, cultures, and goals, students are more likely to work for you if they feel valued and respected. This sense of trust can help connect students and teachers together and help reduce anxiety while encouraging students to take risks when speaking in class or trying to vocabulary (Meng, 2021). Teachers can build rapport by greeting students warmly, showing curiosity about their cultures, and incorporating elements of their experiences into the lesson. Simple actions, like listening, celebrating small successes, and demonstrating care and support can make students feel safe and ready to learn. When ELL students feel emotionally safe and connected to their teacher, their motivation to learn is more likely to increase because they see a classroom as a space where their voice matters and they are recognized.

Conclusion

Motivation is the foundation for successful learning among ELLs, influencing their willingness to

participate, persist, and achieve goals in an academic setting. This literature review illustrates when teachers intentionally meet students' needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Teachers foster intrinsic motivation, and the love for learning. Both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation play a central role in shaping student engagement, particularly when it is thoughtfully balanced in early childhood classrooms. Teachers who provide choice, scaffold, instruction, and build powerful relationships, can empower ELL students to take ownership of their own learning and feel confident and ready to use a new language when they are putting in a situation where it is necessary. Supporting ELL students' motivation is not only about language, but also about building a community of belonging, encouragement, and growth so students can grow academically, socially, and emotionally.

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