

PSYCHOLOGICAL FACTORS INFLUENCING MOTIVATION IN LEARNING ENGLISH AMONG UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

Mokhinur Muzaffar-kizi Muzaffarova

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0007-6370-5066>

mohinurmuzaffarova@gmail.com

Muslima Abduvohid-qizi Abdumannobova

muslimaabduvahidovna@gmail.com

Robiya Adham-qizi Ibrohimova

robiyaibrohimova05@gmail.com

Nordic International University

Abstract: This study investigates the psychological factors influencing motivation in learning English among university students, with a particular focus on cognitive, emotional, and social determinants. Grounded in contemporary theories of educational psychology, the research aims to identify key variables that shape learners' intrinsic and extrinsic motivation within higher education contexts. A mixed-methods approach was employed, combining quantitative survey data collected from undergraduate students with qualitative insights obtained through semi-structured interviews. The instruments measured constructs such as self-efficacy, anxiety, attitudes toward English, and perceived social support. Statistical analysis, including correlation and regression techniques, was used to examine relationships between variables, while thematic analysis was applied to interpret qualitative data. The findings reveal that self-efficacy and positive attitudes toward English significantly enhance learners' motivation, whereas language anxiety negatively impacts engagement. Additionally, social factors - such as peer influence and teacher support - emerge as critical contributors to sustained motivation. The results also indicate that intrinsic motivation is more strongly associated with long-term language acquisition outcomes than extrinsic motivation. In conclusion, the study highlights the multifaceted nature of motivation in English language learning and underscores the importance of addressing psychological dimensions in pedagogical practices.

Keywords: motivation in language learning, English as a Foreign Language (EFL), psychological factors, self-efficacy, language anxiety, intrinsic motivation, extrinsic motivation, university students, second language acquisition, learner attitudes, social support, higher education

Introduction

In the context of globalization and increasing academic mobility, proficiency in English has become a fundamental requirement for university students worldwide. As the dominant medium of international communication, science, and technology, English plays a pivotal role in shaping students' academic and professional trajectories. However, despite its recognized importance, many learners encounter persistent challenges in maintaining motivation throughout the language acquisition process. This issue has directed scholarly attention toward the psychological dimensions that underpin motivation in second language learning. Motivation is widely regarded as one of the most critical determinants of success in learning English as a Foreign Language

(EFL). It is a multifaceted construct influenced by a range of internal and external factors, including learners' beliefs, emotions, attitudes, and social environment. Early research emphasized the distinction between integrative and instrumental motivation, highlighting learners' desire either to integrate into the target language community or to achieve practical goals such as career advancement (Gardner, 1985)¹. More recent perspectives, however, conceptualize motivation as dynamic and context-dependent, shaped by learners' ongoing interactions with their environment (Dörnyei, 2009)². Among the most influential psychological factors are self-efficacy, language anxiety, and learner attitudes. Self-efficacy, defined as an individual's belief in their capacity to perform specific tasks, has been shown to significantly enhance persistence and engagement in language learning (Bandura, 1997)³. Conversely, language anxiety often acts as a debilitating factor, reducing learners' willingness to communicate and negatively affecting performance (Horwitz et al., 1986)⁴. Additionally, learners' attitudes toward English, including their perceptions of its usefulness and cultural value, play a crucial role in shaping motivational intensity. Student motivation and engagement in language learning are strongly influenced by pedagogical approaches that emphasize autonomy, relevance, and real-world application. Project-based learning (PBL) has been shown to enhance students' intrinsic motivation by engaging them in meaningful tasks connected to their personal and professional interests, while also developing essential skills such as teamwork, communication, and problem-solving (Muzaffarova, 2025c)⁵. This aligns with the principles of learner autonomy, which highlight the importance of giving students control over their learning process to foster deeper engagement and responsibility (Muzaffarova, 2025b)⁶. Furthermore, culturally responsive teaching (CRT) plays a significant role in increasing student engagement by incorporating learners' cultural backgrounds and lived experiences into the learning process, thereby fostering a deeper connection to the content and encouraging active participation (Muzaffarova, 2025a)⁷. Together, these approaches emphasize the importance of creating inclusive, student-centered learning environments that support both motivation and academic success.

Furthermore, social and contextual variables - such as teacher support, peer interaction, and classroom environment - contribute to the development and maintenance of motivation. The interplay between intrinsic motivation (driven by internal interest and enjoyment) and extrinsic motivation (driven by external rewards or pressures) further complicates this phenomenon (Deci & Ryan, 2000)⁸. Understanding how these psychological components

¹ Gardner, R. C. (1985). *Social psychology and second language learning: The role of attitudes and motivation*. Edward Arnold. According to Gardner (1985), motivation consists of effort, desire, and positive attitudes toward learning the language.

² Dörnyei, Z. (2009). *The psychology of second language acquisition*. Oxford University Press. Dörnyei's L2 Motivational Self System, emphasize the role of learners' self-concept and future-oriented identities

³ Bandura, A. (1997). *Self-efficacy: The exercise of control*. W.H. Freeman. Self-efficacy theory posits that individuals' beliefs in their abilities directly influence their performance and persistence.

⁴ Horwitz, E. K., Horwitz, M. B., & Cope, J. (1986). Foreign language classroom anxiety. *The Modern Language Journal*, 70(2), 125–132. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-4781.1986.tb05256.x>

⁵ Muzaffarova, M. (2025). Project-based learning in higher education: A methodological perspective. *Theoretical Aspects in the Formation of Pedagogical Sciences*, 4(7), 193–201.

⁶ Muzaffarova, M. (2025). Developing learners' autonomy in higher education: Comparative perspectives. *Eurasian Journal of Social Sciences, Philosophy and Culture*, 5(10).

⁷ Muzaffarova, M. (2025). Culturally responsive teaching: Methodologies for inclusive education. *Педагогика и психология в современном мире: теоретические и практические исследования*, 4(8), 11–17.

⁸ Deci, E. L., & Ryan, R. M. (2000). The “what” and “why” of goal pursuits: Human needs and the self-determination of behavior. *Psychological Inquiry*, 11(4), 227–268. https://doi.org/10.1207/S15327965PLI1104_01

interact is essential for designing effective pedagogical strategies that foster sustained engagement.

Therefore, this study aims to explore the key psychological factors influencing motivation in learning English among university students. By examining both individual and social dimensions, the research seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of motivational processes and offer practical implications for improving language teaching practices in higher education.

Methodology

This study employed a mixed-methods research design in order to obtain a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the psychological factors influencing motivation in learning English among university students. The rationale for adopting this approach lies in its ability to integrate numerical data with in-depth personal insights, thereby ensuring both breadth and depth of analysis. The quantitative component enabled the identification of general patterns and relationships among variables, while the qualitative component provided a deeper exploration of students' lived experiences and perceptions. The research was conducted among undergraduate students enrolled in a higher education institution. A total of 120 participants were selected through stratified random sampling to ensure representation across different academic years and fields of study. The participants were between the ages of 18 and 24 and represented diverse levels of English language proficiency, ranging from elementary to advanced. This diversity was essential in capturing a realistic picture of motivational differences among learners. Data collection was carried out using two main instruments. The primary instrument was a structured questionnaire designed on the basis of well-established constructs in educational psychology. The questionnaire included several sections measuring self-efficacy, language anxiety, intrinsic motivation, extrinsic motivation, and attitudes toward learning English. A five-point Likert scale ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree" was used to quantify responses. Prior to full administration, the questionnaire was piloted with a small group of students to ensure clarity and reliability. The internal consistency of the instrument was confirmed through Cronbach's alpha coefficient, which yielded a value of 0.87, indicating a high level of reliability.

In addition to the questionnaire, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 15 selected participants. These interviews were designed to explore students' emotional experiences, motivational challenges, and perceptions of classroom dynamics in greater detail. The open-ended nature of the questions allowed participants to express their thoughts freely, thereby enriching the overall data set.

The data collection process took place over a period of four weeks. Questionnaires were distributed both in physical form and through an online platform to increase accessibility and participation rates. Interviews were conducted in a quiet and comfortable environment, recorded with participants' consent, and later transcribed verbatim for analysis. For data analysis, quantitative data were processed using statistical software. Descriptive statistics, including means and standard deviations, were calculated to summarize the general tendencies of the data. Inferential statistical methods, particularly Pearson correlation and multiple regression analysis, were employed to examine the relationships between psychological variables and levels of motivation. Qualitative data from interviews were analyzed through thematic analysis, which involved coding the data, identifying recurring patterns, and categorizing them into meaningful

themes. Ethical considerations were carefully observed throughout the research process. All participants were informed about the purpose of the study and provided voluntary consent prior to participation. Confidentiality and anonymity were strictly maintained, and participants were given the right to withdraw at any stage without any negative consequences.

Table 1.

Participant Demographics

Variable	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	52	43%
	Female	68	57%
Age	18–20	64	53%
	21–24	56	47%
Study Program	Linguistic	48	40%
	Non-linguistic	72	60%
English Proficiency	Elementary	30	25%
	Intermediate	58	48%

Table 2.

Variables and Measurement

Variable	Description	Measurement Tool
Self-efficacy	Belief in ability to learn English	Questionnaire items
Language anxiety	Fear or stress during English use	Questionnaire items
Intrinsic motivation	Internal interest in learning English	Questionnaire items
Extrinsic motivation	External rewards (grades, career)	Questionnaire items
Attitudes	Feelings toward English language	Questionnaire items

Results

The results of the study are presented in accordance with the research objectives, focusing on the relationship between psychological factors and students' motivation in learning English. Both descriptive and inferential statistical analyses were conducted to provide a comprehensive interpretation of the data.

The descriptive statistics revealed that the overall level of motivation among participants was moderately high ($M = 3.68$, $SD = 0.74$). Among the psychological variables, self-efficacy demonstrated the highest mean score ($M = 3.85$, $SD = 0.66$), indicating that most students possessed a relatively strong belief in their ability to learn English. In contrast, language anxiety showed a moderate level ($M = 3.12$, $SD = 0.81$), suggesting that a considerable proportion of students experienced discomfort or nervousness during language use.

Table 3.

Descriptive Statistics of Key Variables

Variable	Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (SD)
Motivation	3.68	0.74
Self-efficacy	3.85	0.66
Language Anxiety	3.12	0.81
Intrinsic Motivation	3.79	0.70
Extrinsic Motivation	3.55	0.76

Attitudes	3.88	0.69
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To examine the relationships between variables, Pearson correlation analysis was conducted. The results indicated a strong positive correlation between self-efficacy and motivation ($r = 0.62, p < 0.01$), suggesting that students who believed in their abilities were more likely to be motivated. Similarly, intrinsic motivation demonstrated a significant positive correlation with overall motivation ($r = 0.71, p < 0.01$), highlighting its critical role in sustained engagement.

Conversely, language anxiety was negatively correlated with motivation ($r = -0.48, p < 0.01$), indicating that higher levels of anxiety were associated with lower motivation. Extrinsic motivation showed a moderate positive relationship ($r = 0.39, p < 0.05$), while attitudes toward English exhibited a strong positive correlation ($r = 0.65, p < 0.01$).

Table 4.

Correlation Matrix

Variables	1	2	3	4	5
1. Motivation	1				
2. Self-efficacy	0.62**	1			
3. Anxiety	-0.48**	-0.41**	1		
4. Intrinsic Motivation	0.71**	0.58**	-0.36*	1	
5. Attitudes	0.65**	0.60**	-0.44**	0.63**	1

Note: * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$

In order to determine the predictive power of psychological factors, a multiple regression analysis was performed. The overall model was statistically significant ($R^2 = 0.58, F(4,115) = 39.72, p < 0.001$), indicating that 58% of the variance in motivation could be explained by the selected variables.

Among the predictors, intrinsic motivation emerged as the strongest predictor ($\beta = 0.41, p < 0.001$), followed by self-efficacy ($\beta = 0.33, p < 0.001$). Attitudes toward English also contributed significantly ($\beta = 0.29, p < 0.01$), while language anxiety had a negative predictive effect ($\beta = -0.25, p < 0.01$).

Table 5.

Multiple Regression Analysis

Predictor	Beta (β)	t-value	Significance (p)
Self-efficacy	0.33	4.87	0.000
Anxiety	-0.25	-3.92	0.001
Intrinsic Motivation	0.41	5.76	0.000
Attitudes	0.29	4.11	0.002

The qualitative findings further supported the quantitative results. Thematic analysis revealed three dominant themes: “confidence in language ability,” “fear of making mistakes,” and “influence of supportive learning environments.” Students with higher motivation frequently expressed confidence and enjoyment in learning English, whereas less motivated students reported anxiety and fear of negative evaluation. Additionally, many participants emphasized the importance of teacher encouragement and peer interaction in sustaining their motivation.

Overall, the results demonstrate that psychological factors play a significant and multifaceted role in shaping motivation in English language learning. The integration of quantitative and qualitative findings provides a robust and comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon.

Discussion

The present study sought to examine the psychological factors influencing motivation in learning English among university students. The findings provide substantial evidence that motivation is not a singular construct but rather a dynamic interplay of cognitive, emotional, and social variables. By integrating both quantitative and qualitative data, this study offers a comprehensive interpretation of how these factors operate within the context of higher education.

One of the most significant findings of the study is the strong positive relationship between self-efficacy and motivation. This result is consistent with the theoretical framework proposed by Albert Bandura (1997), who argued that individuals with higher self-efficacy are more likely to engage in challenging tasks and persist in the face of difficulties. In the context of English language learning, students who believe in their ability to succeed are more willing to participate actively and take risks in communication. The qualitative data further reinforce this interpretation, as highly motivated students frequently expressed confidence and a sense of control over their learning process.

Another key finding concerns the role of intrinsic motivation, which emerged as the strongest predictor of overall motivation. This aligns with the principles of “Self-Determination Theory (SDT), developed by Deci and Ryan (2017). This theory proposes that learners are intrinsically motivated when their psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness are fulfilled. In the context of independent study, autonomy refers to the sense of ownership over learning decisions; competence is the belief that one can effectively master tasks; and relatedness is the feeling of meaningful connection with teachers and peers” (Muzaffarova, 2025b, p. 119). This suggests that fostering intrinsic motivation should be a primary objective in language teaching, particularly in university settings where autonomous learning is critical.

In contrast, language anxiety was found to have a significant negative impact on motivation, corroborating earlier findings by Elaine Horwitz et al. (1986). The negative correlation between anxiety and motivation indicates that emotional barriers can hinder students’ willingness to engage in language learning activities. Interview responses revealed that fear of making mistakes and negative evaluation were among the most common concerns, which often led to avoidance behaviors. This highlights the necessity of creating a supportive and non-threatening classroom environment to mitigate anxiety and promote active participation.

Furthermore, the study confirms the importance of learners’ attitudes toward English as a determining factor in motivation. Positive attitudes were strongly associated with higher motivation levels, supporting the socio-educational model proposed by Robert Gardner (1985). Students who perceived English as valuable for their future academic and professional goals were more motivated to invest effort in learning. This finding underscores the role of perceived relevance in shaping learners’ engagement.

The results also emphasize the contribution of social and contextual factors, particularly teacher support and peer interaction. These findings are consistent with contemporary

perspectives advanced by Zoltán Dörnyei (2009) and Ema Ushioda (2011)⁹, who conceptualize motivation as socially mediated and context-dependent. Students who reported supportive relationships with teachers and collaborative learning experiences with peers exhibited higher levels of motivation. This suggests that motivation is not solely an internal attribute but is significantly shaped by the learning environment.

Taken together, the findings of this study highlight the multifaceted and interactive nature of motivation in English language learning. The convergence of quantitative and qualitative evidence strengthens the validity of the results and demonstrates that both individual psychological factors and external social influences must be considered in understanding student motivation. From a pedagogical perspective, these findings suggest that educators should adopt a holistic approach that simultaneously enhances self-efficacy, fosters intrinsic motivation, reduces anxiety, and promotes positive attitudes through supportive teaching practices.

In summary, this study contributes to the growing body of research in second language acquisition by providing empirical evidence on the key psychological determinants of motivation among university students. It also offers practical implications for improving language teaching strategies and creating more effective and engaging learning environments in higher education.

Conclusion

The present study has examined the psychological factors influencing motivation in learning English among university students, providing a comprehensive analysis through the integration of quantitative and qualitative data. The findings confirm that motivation is a complex and multidimensional construct shaped by the interaction of cognitive, emotional, and social variables. The study demonstrates that self-efficacy, intrinsic motivation, and positive attitudes toward English are significant positive predictors of learners' motivation, while language anxiety exerts a negative influence. Among these factors, intrinsic motivation emerged as the most powerful determinant, emphasizing the importance of internal interest and personal engagement in sustaining long-term learning. These results highlight that students are more likely to succeed when they perceive learning as meaningful and aligned with their personal goals.

Furthermore, the findings underscore the critical role of the learning environment in shaping motivation. Supportive teacher-student relationships, collaborative peer interaction, and a psychologically safe classroom atmosphere contribute significantly to enhancing learners' engagement and reducing anxiety. This indicates that motivation should not be viewed solely as an individual trait but rather as a socially mediated phenomenon. From a pedagogical perspective, the study suggests that educators should adopt learner-centered approaches that foster autonomy, build confidence, and minimize anxiety. Incorporating interactive teaching methods, providing constructive feedback, and creating opportunities for meaningful communication can significantly improve students' motivational levels. Additionally, curriculum designers should integrate strategies that enhance intrinsic motivation, such as task relevance, personalization, and real-world application. Despite its contributions, the study is not without limitations. The sample was limited to a specific group of university students, which may affect the generalizability of the findings. Future research could expand the sample size, include longitudinal designs, and explore additional variables such as cultural influences or digital learning environments.

⁹ Ushioda, E. (2011). Language learning motivation, self and identity: Current theoretical perspectives. *Computer Assisted Language Learning*, 24(3), 199–210. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09588221.2010.538701>

In conclusion, this study provides valuable insights into the psychological mechanisms underlying motivation in English language learning. By addressing both individual and contextual factors, it offers a foundation for developing more effective teaching practices and fostering a more engaging and supportive educational environment in higher education.

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