**Research Article**

# Exploring Motivation among EFL Undergraduate Students: A Self-Determination Theory Perspective

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## Abstract

Motivation is essential for effective language acquisition, yet many EFL (English as a foreign language) students struggle to maintain it throughout their learning journey. This study explores the role of Self-Determination Theory (SDT) in enhancing motivation among EFL students. The primary research question addressed is: How does SDT influence motivation among EFL students? Additionally, the study investigates two sub-questions: What are the key factors that affect motivation in EFL learning environments? How are autonomy, competence, and relatedness, as described by SDT, applied in teaching methodologies? For this purpose, journal articles from several databases (Google Scholar, JSTOR, Science Direct, and Semantic Scholar) were reviewed, and 43 articles were analyzed using the systematic review method. The findings highlighted that highly motivated learners exhibit greater engagement, determination, and better learning outcomes. Motivation is dynamic and influenced by various factors, with SDT emphasizing the importance of autonomy. Students who feel empowered and in control of their learning are more intrinsically motivated. Autonomy, combined with feelings of competence and relatedness, further boosts motivation. The study reveals that moving beyond traditional teacher-centered approaches is crucial, advocating for student-centered methodologies such as cooperative learning and task-based learning. These approaches grant students autonomy and foster competence and relatedness through collaboration and peer interaction. Autonomy-supportive teaching practices—including providing choices, clear explanations, and a supportive environment—are essential for meeting students' psychological needs and enhancing intrinsic motivation. Ultimately, fostering intrinsic motivation in EFL students through SDT principles and student-centered methodologies creates a more conducive learning environment, leading to improved learning outcomes. Further research should investigate the interplay between SDT principles, individual differences, cultural contexts, and teaching methodologies to enhance our understanding of motivation in diverse EFL settings.

**Keywords:** *Learning motivation; Self-determination theory; Autonomy; EFL*

## Introduction

English is the universal language of communication, overcoming national barriers. As a result, English proficiency is becoming increasingly valued as a prerequisite for further study and employment. There are more demands for students, especially from countries that categorize English as a Foreign Language (EFL), such as Indonesia, to learn English. Wardani et al. (2020) stated that higher learning motivation leads to higher student achievement and learning outcomes. The statement is supported by Chiappetta-Santana et al. (2022), who suggest that high learning motivation positively relates to socioemotional skills and school performance. Based on the information above, it can be concluded that to succeed in education and careers, students, especially in EFL countries like Indonesia, need strong motivation to learn English due to its global necessity.

However, EFL Students often have difficulty maintaining their motivation throughout the learning process, which hinders their progress and potentially causes them frustration and hinders the English Language learning process. These common issues require a better understanding of the components influencing EFL students' desire to learn English. Furthermore, to maintain students' motivation to learn English, creating a supportive environment that emphasizes the importance of relevance, engagement, and progress is important. Fostering innate desire through significant educational encounters is crucial for maintaining their attention.

In line with that, the existing research on EFL student motivation has provided valuable insights but also reveals several limitations. Many studies have focused on the outcomes of motivated behavior rather than the underlying processes that sustain motivation (Ushioda, 2008). There is also a tendency to generalize findings across different cultural and educational contexts without considering specific local nuances. For example, much of the research is based on Western educational settings, which may not fully capture the motivational dynamics in Asian countries like Indonesia (Lamb, 2012). Additionally, limited research explores motivation among different age groups, such as young learners versus adult learners, and how their motivational factors might differ (Muñoz, 2007).

Another gap is the lack of longitudinal studies that examine how motivation evolves in response to changing educational contexts and personal experiences (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011). To fill the gap from previous research, Self-determination theory (SDT) is a framework for understanding factors that facilitate or undermine intrinsic motivation, autonomous extrinsic motivation, and psychological wellness in educational settings (Ryan & Deci, 2020). The theory of self-determination (SDT) differs from many models used to investigate learner motivation. Unlike many past models focused on motivation, SDT delves into the quality of motivation, specifically autonomy (Deci et al., 1991). Students with high autonomy feel in control of their learning. They have a sense of choice in what they learn and how they learn it. This feeling of empowerment fosters a sense of competence and the belief that they can be successful in their English language learning (Deci et al., 1991; Şakrak-Ekin & Balçıkanlı, 2019). Furthermore, SDT emphasizes the importance of relatedness and connection with teachers and peers. When students feel supported and valued within the learning environment, they are more likely to be intrinsically motivated to learn (Deci et al., 1991).

This paper explores the significance of motivation in EFL education and proposes Self-Determination Theory (SDT) as a framework to understand and enhance intrinsic motivation among EFL students. By addressing the psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness outlined by SDT, educators can cultivate a more self-determined learning environment that fosters students' intrinsic motivation for English language learning. Through an analysis of the relationship between the satisfaction of these psychological needs and intrinsic motivation, this study aims to provide insights for educators to design effective instructional strategies tailored to the needs of EFL students. Educators can promote sustained motivation and improve learning outcomes in EFL classrooms by empowering students to take an active role in their education and facilitating a supportive learning environment.

## Methods

This study employs a systematic literature review to explore the role of Self-Determination Theory (SDT) in enhancing intrinsic motivation among EFL students. The systematic review follows a structured approach to identify, evaluate, and synthesize relevant research.

Relevant Journal Articles published between the years 2005-2023 were searched electronically using the help of web-based artificial intelligence (Consensus AI and Sci-hub) to group references that fit the established themes and criteria. The Journal Articles were selected from several databases, including

Google Scholar, JSTOR, Science Direct, and Semantic Scholar. The process involved several stages: defining research questions, setting inclusion and exclusion criteria, searching for Relevant Studies, selecting studies, extracting data, and Synthesizing Findings.

### Defining Research Questions

The first step in the systematic review was to clearly define the research questions. The primary research question was: "How does Self-Determination Theory (SDT) influence motivation among EFL students?" Sub-questions included:

1. What are the key factors that affect motivation in EFL learning environments?
2. How are autonomy, competence, and relatedness as described by SDT applied in teaching methodologies?

By clearly defining these questions, the authors ensured that the review would be focused and relevant to the aims of the study.

### Setting Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

The authors established criteria to determine which studies would be included in the review. The inclusion criteria were:
1. Studies published in peer-reviewed journals.
2. Studies focused on EFL (English as a Foreign Language) students.
3. Research that specifically examined motivation using the framework of Self-Determination Theory.
4. Studies published in English.

Meanwhile, the exclusion criteria included:
1. Studies not peer-reviewed.
2. Research focusing on ESL (English as a Second Language) instead of EFL.
3. Studies not utilizing SDT as a theoretical framework.
4. Articles not available in full text.

These criteria helped to narrow down the search to the most relevant and high-quality studies

### Searching for Relevant Studies

The authors conducted a comprehensive search of electronic databases including Google Scholar, JSTOR, Science Direct, and Semantic Scholar. The search strategy involved using a combination of keywords and phrases such as "Self-Determination Theory," "intrinsic motivation," "EFL students," "autonomy," "competence," and "relatedness." Boolean operators (AND, OR, NOT) were used to refine the search

results. In addition to database searches, authors reviewed the reference lists of selected articles to identify any additional relevant studies.

### Selecting Studies

After retrieving the search results, the authors screened the titles and abstracts of the articles to determine their relevance. Studies that appeared to meet the inclusion criteria were selected for full-text review. Two independent reviewers assessed the full texts to ensure consistency and reliability in the selection process. Any disagreements were resolved through discussion or by involving a third reviewer.

### Extracting Data

Data extraction involved systematically collecting information from the selected studies. A standardized data extraction form was used to record the following details:
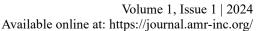1. Author(s) and year of publication
2. Study aims and research questions
3. Methodology and study design
4. Sample characteristics
5. Key findings related to SDT and motivation
6. Conclusions and implications

This process ensured that all relevant information was captured consistently across studies.

### Synthesizing Findings

The final stage involved synthesizing the findings from the selected studies. A narrative synthesis approach was used to summarize and interpret the results, focusing on how SDT influences intrinsic motivation among EFL students. The synthesis highlighted common themes, patterns, and discrepancies in the findings, providing a comprehensive understanding of the current state of research on this topic.

The systematic review methodology employed in this study provided a rigorous and structured approach to identifying and analyzing relevant research on SDT and intrinsic motivation in EFL settings. By following clearly defined stages, from formulating research questions to synthesizing findings, the authors ensured that the review was comprehensive, transparent, and reliable. This methodology allows educators and researchers to better understand the factors that enhance motivation among EFL students and to develop strategies that support effective language learning.

## Results and Discussions

### Intrinsic and Extrinsic Motivation in EFL Learning

Language acquisition is one of the many actions that people are motivated to engage in. Motivation is a complex idea that includes the wants and driving forces behind these behaviors (Siddikova, 2023). In addition, motivation is essential for maintaining interest in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) study, acquiring the language successfully, and eventually achieving learning objectives (Nevisi & Farhani, 2022; Peng & Fu, 2021). However, motivation is not a single thing; its source and quality might differ. Two main types of motivation influence language learning: intrinsic and extrinsic. Intrinsic motivation stems from a genuine desire to connect with native speakers and their culture. Learners driven by this type of motivation might be fascinated by a particular country's customs, literature, or movies and see language acquisition as a key to unlocking a deeper understanding and appreciation (Et al., 2021; Svanes, 1987). Extrinsic motivation, on the other hand, is fueled by more practical goals. Learners with instrumental motivation might aim to improve their career prospects, travel more easily, or fulfill an academic requirement (Ellwood, 2020; Liu & Yu, 2021). Both types of motivation can be powerful forces in language learning, and some learners may even be driven by a combination of both.

Maintaining a balance between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation benefits students by increasing their engagement and accomplishment. Deeper learning and self-regulation abilities are promoted by intrinsic motivation fueled by curiosity and self-satisfaction (Ali et al., 2023). Encouraging students to seek information for its own sake fosters a lifelong love of learning. Extrinsic motivation, conversely, offers concrete incentives and reinforces desired actions through means like awards or recognition. Extrinsic rewards provide short-term encouragement and goal attainment (Mahmud et al., 2023), but intrinsic motivation fosters passion and commitment. A balanced approach efficiently utilizes both types of motivation. Students benefit from this synergy by sustaining their motivation, fortitude, and commitment to academic and personal development.

### Key Factors that Affect Student's Motivation: Intrinsic vs. Extrinsic Motivation in EFL Learning

Self-Determination Theory (SDT) offers a valuable framework for understanding the different types of motivation present in EFL learning. SDT differentiates between extrinsic and intrinsic motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2008; Howard et al., 2020). Extrinsic

motivation arises from external pressures or rewards, such as parental expectations, grades, or the desire to fulfill language requirements for university admission (Ellwood, 2020; Liu & Yu, 2021). While extrinsic motivation can be a useful starting point, it is often fleeting and susceptible to change in external circumstances. For example, once the language requirement is met, a student's motivation solely driven by extrinsic factors may diminish.

In contrast, intrinsic motivation stems from internal desires, curiosity, and the inherent satisfaction of the learning process. Intrinsically motivated students are driven by a genuine interest in learning English and the desire to improve their fluency for personal growth, communication, and exploration of new cultures (Bailey et al., 2021). Research suggests that intrinsic motivation is a more potent predictor of long-term language learning success and leads to deeper engagement with the language (Eslit, 2023).

### Criticisms of the Extrinsic vs. Intrinsic Dichotomy

While the distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation is valuable, some scholars argue that it presents an overly simplistic view of the motivational landscape (Diseth et al., 2020; Y. Liu et al., 2020; Ryan & Deci, 2020). For instance, some extrinsic rewards, such as praise focusing on effort and progress, can foster a sense of competence and contribute to intrinsic motivation (Eslit, 2023). Furthermore, integrative motivation, which combines intrinsic and extrinsic elements, may also play a significant role in EFL learning. Students may be initially motivated by extrinsic factors (e.g., job opportunities) but develop a genuine interest in the language over time, leading to a more intrinsic form of motivation (Rozmatovna, 2020).

### Self-Determination Theory (SDT) influence on student motivation

SDT goes beyond the simple dichotomy of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation by emphasizing the role of psychological needs in fostering autonomous motivation, the most self-determined form of motivation (Chong & Gagné, 2019). These psychological needs include:

> **Autonomy.** The feeling of control and choice over one's learning experience. Students who feel they have a say in their learning activities are more likely to be intrinsically motivated (Grund & Tulis, 2020; Waterschoot et al., 2019). Studies by Jiang & Zhang, 2021, and J. Wang et al., 2022

demonstrate that student autonomy positively impacts engagement and achievement in EFL classrooms.

**Competence.** The belief in one's ability to succeed and achieve learning goals. Experiencing progress and mastery fosters feelings of competence and intrinsic motivation to continue learning (Asún et al., 2020; Theis et al., 2020). Research by (Asún et al., 2020; Waterschoot et al., 2019) suggests that providing EFL students with clear learning objectives and formative assessments can enhance feelings of competence and intrinsic motivation.

**Relatedness.** The sense of connection and belonging in the learning environment. When students feel supported by their peers and instructors, they are more likely to be intrinsically motivated to learn (Bailey et al., 2021; Kasumi & Xhemaili, 2023; Waterschoot et al., 2019). (Waterschoot et al., 2019) found that fostering a positive and collaborative EFL classroom environment strengthens feelings of relatedness and contributes to increased intrinsic motivation and improved learning outcomes.

### *Application of SDT in EFL Methodologies*

Understanding the dynamics of motivation in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning is crucial for enhancing student engagement and achievement. Self-Determination Theory (SDT) offers a valuable framework for aligning teaching methodologies with students' psychological needs. Research by Deci et al. (1991) and Liu et al. (2020) highlights the effectiveness of student-centered approaches, such as cooperative learning and task-based learning, in promoting intrinsic motivation. These methods grant students autonomy, foster competence through collaborative tasks, and build relatedness through peer interactions. However, as Chiappetta-Santana et al. (2022) and others argue, merely adopting specific methodologies is not enough. The key to increasing motivation is careful instructional design and creating a supportive classroom environment that encourages student choice and autonomy.

### *SDT and EFL Teaching Methodologies*

Several studies have explored the alignment between SDT principles and EFL teaching methodologies. Research by Deci et al., 1991 suggested that student-centered approaches, such as cooperative learning and task-based learning, can effectively fulfill psychological needs and promote intrinsic motivation. These methods give students autonomy over their learning process, opportunities to experience competence through collaboration and task completion, and foster feelings of relatedness through peer interaction.

However, simply implementing specific methodologies may not guarantee increased motivation. The effectiveness hinges on careful instructional design and a supportive classroom environment that encourages student choice and autonomy (Chiappetta-Santana et al., 2022; Wang et al., 2020; Wardani et al., 2020). This is why the research by Chong and Gagné (2019), Deci et al. (1991), and Handayani et al. (2022) emphasize the methods to implement SDT principles in EFL teaching methodologies effectively; educators must carefully design their instructional approaches and create a supportive classroom environment as mentioned below:

1. **Careful Instructional Design**

   1.1. **Student-Centered Learning**. Designing lessons that prioritize student involvement and engagement is crucial. This can be achieved by incorporating activities that allow students to participate actively in their learning process, such as problem-solving tasks, group projects, and discussions. These activities should be meaningful and relevant to the student's interests and goals, which helps foster intrinsic motivation.
   1.2. **Differentiated Instruction**. It is essential to recognize and accommodate diverse learning styles and abilities. Differentiated instruction involves tailoring teaching methods and materials to meet students' varied needs. This might include offering different types of assignments, varying the complexity of tasks, and providing multiple ways for students to demonstrate their understanding.
   1.3. **Clear Learning Objectives**. Setting clear, achievable learning goals helps students understand what they are working towards and why. These objectives should be communicated explicitly and revisited throughout the course to keep students focused and motivated.
   1.4. **Formative Assessment**. Regular, low-stakes assessments that provide feedback rather than grades can help students monitor their progress and identify areas for improvement. This approach supports competence development by highlighting progress and offering constructive feedback that encourages further learning.
   1.5. **Choice and Autonomy**. Giving students choices in their learning activities can enhance their sense of autonomy. This could include allowing students to select project topics, choose from various reading materials, or decide how to present their learning. Providing options

empowers students and makes learning more personalized and engaging.

2. **Supportive Classroom Environment**

2.1. **Positive Teacher-Student Relationships**. Building strong, supportive relationships with students is fundamental. Teachers should strive to create an environment where students feel respected, valued, and understood. This can be achieved through active listening, showing empathy, and providing individualized support.

2.2. **Collaborative Learning Environment**: Encouraging student collaboration fosters a sense of relatedness and community. Group activities, peer reviews, and cooperative learning tasks help students build connections with their peers, which can enhance motivation and engagement.

2.2.1. **Encouraging a Growth Mindset**. Promoting the belief that abilities and intelligence can be developed through effort and perseverance can significantly impact students' motivation. Teachers can support a growth mindset by praising effort rather than innate ability, encouraging students to view challenges as opportunities for growth, and teaching resilience in the face of setbacks.

2.2.2. **Safe and Inclusive Space**. It is crucial to create a classroom environment where all students feel safe to express their ideas and take risks. This involves establishing clear expectations for respectful behavior, addressing bullying or exclusion, and celebrating diversity.

2.2.3. **Constructive Feedback**. Providing timely, specific, and constructive feedback helps students understand their strengths and areas for improvement. Feedback should focus on the process and effort rather than just the outcome to encourage a deeper engagement with the learning material.

2.2.4. **Encouraging Self-Reflection**. Integrating opportunities for self-reflection helps students develop self-awareness and take ownership of their learning. This could involve reflective journals, self-assessment checklists, personal learning goals, and progress discussions.

By incorporating these elements into their teaching practices, educators can create a learning environment that aligns with SDT principles, enhancing intrinsic motivation and improving learning outcomes for EFL students. The goal is to move beyond traditional, teacher-centered approaches and embrace methodologies that support autonomy, competence, and relatedness, ultimately fostering a more motivated and engaged cohort of language learners.

*The Role of Teacher Behavior in Motivating EFL Learners*

Beyond methodology, teacher behavior is critical in supporting students' psychological needs and motivational orientation. Studies by (Cheng et al., 2016 Grund & Tulis, 2020 Vattøy & Smith, 2019) highlight the importance of autonomy-supportive teaching practices. These practices include providing choices, explaining learning tasks, and encouraging student initiative. Additionally, teachers who demonstrate positive regard for their students, provide constructive feedback, and create a safe learning environment can foster feelings of competence and relatedness, contributing to increased intrinsic motivation.

This study acknowledges several limitations in applying Self-Determination Theory (SDT) to learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL). The focus on psychological needs and motivation overlooked other influential factors. Future research could adopt a more comprehensive approach by examining individual learner differences, such as learning styles and personality traits, and how these interact with psychological needs. Investigating the influence of cultural contexts, particularly collectivist versus individualist cultures, could provide insights into how cultural backgrounds shape motivation. Additionally, exploring the impact of various curriculum designs and teaching methodologies could help develop more effective instructional strategies. Longitudinal studies would be valuable in understanding the evolution of motivation and the long-term effects of SDT-based pedagogical approaches. By considering multiple factors simultaneously, future research can offer a more integrative understanding of motivational dynamics, leading to improved educational practices and learner outcomes in EFL settings.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, this study underscores the critical role of motivation, particularly intrinsic motivation, in learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL). By applying Self-Determination Theory (SDT) as a framework, educators can better understand and cultivate intrinsic motivation among EFL

students by addressing their psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness. The findings highlight the importance of creating a supportive, student-centered learning environment that empowers students to participate actively in their education. Additionally, the study emphasizes the significance of teacher behavior in fostering intrinsic motivation through autonomy-supportive practices. Future research should explore the interplay between SDT principles, individual learner differences, cultural context, and teaching methodologies in diverse EFL learning environments. Longitudinal studies could provide valuable insights into the evolution of motivation over time and the sustained impact of SDT-based pedagogical approaches on EFL learning outcomes. By incorporating these insights and practical recommendations, educators can effectively enhance intrinsic motivation and ultimately improve learning outcomes in EFL classrooms.

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