Enhancing Learner Engagement: A Systematic Literature Review on Motivation in Language Learning and Teaching

Nisrina[1*], Nurul Izza Istiqomah[2*]
Universitas Riau Kepulauan, Kepulauan Riau, Indonesia[1,2]
*Corresponding Email: nisrinaamsal53@gmail.com

Abstract

Learner motivation is a critical factor in the success of language learning, directly influencing engagement, persistence, and achievement. This study presents a systematic literature review (SLR) on motivation in language learning and teaching, focusing on identifying key motivational theories, strategies, and their effectiveness across various educational contexts. Following a systematic protocol, 20 peer-reviewed journal articles published between 2015 and 2024 were analyzed. Findings indicate that both intrinsic and extrinsic motivational strategies, when aligned with learners' cultural and contextual needs, significantly enhance engagement. Technology integration, task-based learning, and teacher feedback emerged as prominent factors. This review provides a comprehensive synthesis of recent research and offers insights for educators and curriculum designers.

Keywords: engagement, language learning, motivation, systematic literature review, teaching strategies

Introduction

Motivation is often agreed upon as the central element of the language acquisition process. Motivation determines the learner's motivation to initiate learning, continue his or her effort, and achieve their language goal successfully (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2015). Motivation influences cognitive processes, emotional involvement, and behavior in engagement for learning activities (Skinner & Pitzer, 2019). Numerous motivational theories have shaped language education, including Gardner's Socio-Educational Model, emphasizing integrative and instrumental motivation, and Dörnyei's L2 Motivational Self System, which links motivation to learners' ideal selves.

Language learning, particularly in second or foreign language contexts, often demands long-term perseverance over protracted periods of time, and maintaining high levels of motivation is critical to enable students to persevere through adversity. It has always been established empirically in research that learners with higher motivation levels are more engaged in learning activities, use effective strategies, and reach superior levels of competence (Ryan & Deci, 2017).

Despite enormous theoretical development, there remain voids in the implementation and utilization of motivational methods across different learning contexts. Most traditional motivational theories were formulated within Western settings and may not serve well to counter cultural diversity

or individual variations in learners (Henry & Thorsen, 2018). Hence, research in the past decade has grown increasingly focused on context-sensitive and technology-based approaches for fostering motivation.

Teng and Zhang (2020) highlighted how self-regulated learning strategies make a significant contribution to learner autonomy and motivation. Chik and Ho (2017) mapped out how digital tools and mobile apps support learners through adaptive, self-paced opportunities for learning. Meanwhile, Rachels and Rockinson-Szapkiw (2018) explored how gamification can encourage learner engagement and emotional investment.

Furthermore, studies have underscored the central role played by instructors in shaping learner motivation through educational practices and interpersonal connections (Mercer & Dörnyei, 2020). Interactive forces of teacher support, classroom atmosphere, and learner self-image create a motivational climate that can promote or hinder activation.

A second emerging area of interest is how technology-mediated environments help to build motivation. Combining mobile-assisted language learning (MALL), digital storytelling, and adaptive learning spaces opens up new avenues for personalizing learning and keeping learners interested in the long term (Stockwell, 2016).

In spite of these encouraging trends, the research area still needs systematic syntheses that map across the kinds of motivational strategies being used, their empirically tested effects on various aspects of engagement, and contextual factors that make them effective. Without such syntheses, it is difficult for educators and policymakers to make effective decisions regarding constructing motivation-improving interventions.

This study fills this gap with a structured examination of contemporary empirical studies on motivation in language learning. It attempts to find answers to: (1) What are the most common motivational strategies applied in language teaching? (2) How do the strategies impact learner engagement? (3) What environmental variables moderate the efficacy of motivational interventions?

Method

This systematic literature review (SLR) was conducted by adhering strictly to the methodological guidelines proposed by Kitchenham and Charters (2007). The process started with the formulation of precise research questions that aimed to uncover the most common motivational strategies in language learning, evaluate their impact on learner motivation, and identify the contextual factors that mediate the effectiveness of these strategies. Developing these questions provided the overall framework that ensured subsequent stages of the review were systematic and aligned with the study's goals.

Following the formulation of the research questions, specific inclusion and exclusion criteria were established in an effort to allow for effective selection of the suitable literature. The inclusion criteria set the requirement that only peer-reviewed journal studies published within the time frame from 2015 to 2024 would be used. Moreover, the studies needed to have focused exclusively on motivation and participation in language learning. Eligible studies should present empirical evidence from qualitative, quantitative, or mixed-methods research and should be published in English for the

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convenience of accessibility and comparability. On the contrary, theory articles, opinion pieces, language studies unrelated to language education, and articles whose full texts were not freely accessible were excluded from consideration for review outright.

A comprehensive and exhaustive search plan was then utilized on diverse scholarly databases, such as Scopus, Web of Science, ERIC, and ScienceDirect. Advanced searching strategies using the employment of Boolean operators were utilized to combine keywords like "motivation AND language learning," "learner engagement AND EFL/ESL," and "motivational strategies in language education." This provided an initial output of 546 studies.

The second stage involved a rigorous screening process. Titles and abstracts of the articles obtained were initially screened to assess their relevance to the research questions. Articles that survived the title and abstract screening were then read in their full text to determine their eligibility based on the inclusion and exclusion criteria. This careful step of screening ensured that only those studies with firm empirical evidence on motivational strategies and learner engagement in language teaching were admitted into the synthesis.

Ultimately, 20 articles were selected to synthesize and review. Information that was extracted through these studies included information on motivational approaches employed, the types of engagement outcomes reported, and contextual determinants of effects realized. These data that were extracted were then thematically analyzed so as to establish emerging patterns, general strategies, and principal findings regarding how motivation results in learner engagement across diverse learning contexts.

This methodical procedure ensured the review was reproducible, open, and comprehensive, thereby providing solid evidence to language learning motivation research.

Results and Discussion

The results of this systematic review of literature yielded rich information on the interconnection between motivational strategies, engagement outcomes, and contextual mediators in language learning environments. Rather than isolating them as discrete points in categories, evidence suggests an interdependent and dynamic relationship between the themes.

Among the general characteristics of the strategies identified in the studies examined was task-based learning. As testified in the study by Xie and Derakhshan (2021), task-based learning activities offer authentic opportunities for communication where students actively engage in real language tasks. The tasks enhance learners' behavioral engagement through the promotion of sustained effort and active participation while simultaneously addressing cognitive engagement through the promotion of higher-order thinking, problem-solving, and critical analysis of language use.

Another approach, one that has proved incredibly powerful for learner engagement and motivation, has been incorporating technology into language learning. Scholars such as Rachels and Rockinson-Szapkiw (2018) have found that the use of mobile apps, gamification, and virtual learning spaces creates responsive and interactive learning spaces. Such learning spaces identify specific needs and tastes of individual learners and therefore enormously increase intellectual and emotional

engagement. The giving of instant feedback, the personalization of learning paths, and the incorporation of game-like elements all combine to keep learners interested, engaged, and motivated over the long term in language learning tasks.

Establishment of learner autonomy through autonomy-supportive pedagogies also emerged as a vital motivational strategy. Nakata (2016) recognizes that wherever teachers grant autonomy to students in setting personal learning goals, choosing positive learning activities, and observing learning processes, the students are found to reflect greater intrinsic motivation and emotional commitment. Autonomy-supportive climates allow students to take control over their own language acquisition, and this results in greater cognitive activation and greater perseverance in overcoming difficulties in learning.

Moreover, the strategic use of feedback and scaffolding was a significant motivational strategy, particularly when tailored to learners' developmental stages and individual needs. As Lee and Drajati (2019) emphasized, timely, specific, and constructive formative feedback helps learners to recognize their progress, build self-efficacy, and maintain emotional resilience in the face of language learning difficulties. Scaffolding activities, such as providing guided assistance on challenging tasks, enable individuals to acquire skills and build confidence gradually and thus improve extended engagement.

Outcomes of engagement in studies that were measured were specified in terms of behavior, emotion, and cognition. Specific, observable behavior was class participation, timely assignment completion, and tenacity in studying. Emotional engagement involved enjoyment, interest, satisfaction, and reduced anxiety. Cognitive engagement entailed strategic thinking, self-regulation, and language content processing of a high magnitude. Motivational strategies with technology integration that supported autonomy were most effective at supporting emotional and cognitive engagement, and task-based learning and feedback styles were strongly related to behavioral engagement.

Finally, the effectiveness of motivational strategies was significantly moderated by contextual conditions. Cultural context moderated students' responsiveness to motivational strategies; that is, collectivist cultures emphasized group work and community-based learning as motivational dimensions. Education level also served as a moderator in that younger students responded to gamified strategies, and higher-level students were assisted by autonomy-supportive and self-regulated learning strategies. The teacher-student relationship was also found to be an effective contextual variable. Research showed that when the students perceived their teachers as encouraging, caring, and motivating, they were more engaged in all aspects.

The dynamic interaction of motivational strategies, engagement outcomes, and contextual mediators calls for a subtle, adaptive, and culturally responsive approach to language learning motivation. Teachers and curriculum designers are encouraged to adopt an integrated model that balances task-based action, technology deployment, autonomy support, and scaffolded feedback in a strategic integration, being sensitive to the socio-cultural as well as individual learner contexts in a move to maximize engagement and language learning accomplishment.

Conclusion

This systematic literature review highlights the central role of motivation in enhancing learner engagement in language learning. Task-based activities, technology integration, autonomy support, and teacher feedback were consistently effective. However, the success of these strategies depends on contextual factors such as culture and learner background. Future research should explore how personalized motivational approaches can be scaled across diverse learning environments.

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