

INTRINSIC MOTIVATION IN ENGLISH LEARNING: PERSPECTIVES FROM LEARNERS AND TEACHERS

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ARTICLE INFO		ABSTRACT
Received:	29/7/2025	This study focuses on exploring the factors influencing intrinsic motivation in English language learning and examines strategies to enhance it among English learners. Guided by Self-Determination Theory, the study employed a qualitative approach through in-depth interviews with 17 non-English major students and 12 English teachers at a higher education institution in Vietnam. The results reveal that intrinsic motivation is primarily driven by personal growth, enjoyment, and self-determined goals for English learning. The teacher participants reported that they regularly apply student-centered, interactive, and engaging teaching approaches, which are essential for cultivating intrinsic motivation among students. Meanwhile the students express a strong desire for greater experiential, contextualized, and authentic English learning opportunities beyond the classroom. The study implies the need for reformulating both teaching methods and curriculum design to foster learning motivation that stems in autonomy, competence, and relatedness. By doing so, English learning becomes more meaningful, empowering, and enduring for students.
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Intrinsic motivation
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ĐỘNG LỰC NỘI TẠI TRONG HỌC TIẾNG ANH: GÓC NHÌN TỪ NGƯỜI HỌC VÀ GIÁO VIÊN

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THÔNG TIN BÀI BÁO		TÓM TẮT
Ngày nhận bài:	29/7/2025	Nghiên cứu này tìm hiểu các yếu tố ảnh hưởng đến động lực nội sinh trong quá trình học tiếng Anh và các chiến lược nhằm nâng cao động lực này cho người học. Dưới sự định hướng của Thuyết Tự quyết, nghiên cứu sử dụng phương pháp định tính với phỏng vấn chuyên sâu 17 sinh viên không chuyên tiếng Anh và 12 giáo viên tiếng Anh tại một cơ sở giáo dục đại học ở Việt Nam. Kết quả cho thấy động lực nội sinh chủ yếu được thúc đẩy bởi định hướng phát triển của cá nhân, đam mê học tập và các mục tiêu do chính người học đặt ra trong việc học tiếng Anh. Các giáo viên tham gia nghiên cứu cho biết họ thường thực hiện phương pháp giảng dạy lấy người học làm trung tâm, các phương pháp dạy học tương tác, và quan tâm đến tạo sự hứng thú đối với học tập. Đây là những yếu tố then chốt trong việc nuôi dưỡng động lực nội sinh cho người học. Trong khi đó, các sinh viên bày tỏ mong muốn được học tập tiếng Anh theo định hướng trải nghiệm, sinh động và gắn liền với bối cảnh thực tế hơn. Nghiên cứu đề nghị cải tiến phương pháp giảng dạy và chương trình đào tạo nhằm thúc đẩy động lực học tập xuất phát từ các khái niệm trọng tâm của Thuyết Tự quyết, đó là quyền tự chủ, năng lực, và sự gắn kết, từ đó giúp quá trình học trở nên ý nghĩa và bền vững hơn.
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TỪ KHÓA

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1. Introduction

The process of learning a second language is a long journey that requires perseverance, effort, and, most importantly, motivation. Among various types of learning motivation, intrinsic motivation holds a particularly significant role. This type of motivation stems from within the learner – from their genuine interest, curiosity, desire to explore, and need for self-fulfillment – rather than from external factors such as grades, diplomas, or rewards. Intrinsic motivation helps sustain long-term interest, encourages learners to actively seek knowledge, overcome challenges, and achieve higher learning outcomes.

However, in reality, not all English learners are highly interested or strongly motivated in learning English. Students may encounter difficulties, feel pressured, or lack a personal connection to the subject, which can lead to ineffective learning or merely learning to meet minimum requirements. This research aims to provide insights into the role of intrinsic motivation in learning English among college students. It seeks to find out how this type of motivation affects learning, and what factors hinder or foster the growth of intrinsic motivation for English learning among college students. Learners' interest, perceived autonomy, sense of competence, and teachers' approaches, models of classroom interactions, etc. will be examined to identify how these factors influence intrinsic motivation among college students in their English language learning process. Such information can be utilized to design curricula, select appropriate teaching methods, and create more supportive learning environments that contribute to learning success.

The study is guided by Self-Determination Theory [1] which conceptualized intrinsic motivation as drive that compels individuals to engage in an activity for the inherent satisfaction, interest, and enjoyment that the activity itself provides, rather than for some separable external outcomes. The theory maintains that relatedness, competence, autonomy supports are three conditions nurturing intrinsic motivation. Individuals are volitional to participate and enhance their performance if these three psychological needs are satisfactorily addressed [2], [3].

Students who are intrinsically motivated to learning English find an internal urge to learn the language because they find it engaging, interesting, or valuable in itself, rather than simply aiming to achieve high grades, gain external rewards, or fulfill curricular requirements [4]. This urge plays a crucial role in establishing sustainable learning habits and promoting deeper learner engagement with the study materials. Dörnyei [5] pointed out that when students are genuinely curious about the English language itself, the cultures of English-speaking countries, or specific topics accessible through English, they can transform learning from an obligation into a voluntary and enjoyable process. If they feel they are making progress, understanding concepts, and using English successfully (even at a basic level), their confidence grows, reinforcing their belief in their ability to succeed and thus motivating them to continue to learn [6]. In addition, the feeling for volitional learning will increase as students have meaningful choices regarding what they learn (e.g., selecting project topics) and how they learn (e.g., choosing learning strategies or materials). As they experience greater control of their actions and outcomes, their sense of ownership deepens, thereby nurturing stronger internal learning motivation [2], [7].

On the other hand, intrinsic motivation can be affected by external factors such as learning environment [8], [9] or teachers' approaches [10]-[12]. Learning environments with characteristics such as psychological safety, mutual respect, encouragement of collaboration over cutthroat competition, and a generally positive and stimulating atmosphere often nurture the relatedness need, thus facilitate the development of intrinsic motivation. Teachers, in tandem, the mediator between the learning environment and the internal psychological states of students, affect students' sense of autonomy, perceived competence, and relatedness. How teachers structure activities and provide choices directly impacts students' sense of being able to act according to one's own will, having choices, and feeling that one's actions are self-initiated and volitional, rather than controlled or coerced. Furthermore, when teachers provide learners with familiar tasks with necessary support and feedbacks in a comfortable learning environment, learners feel that they are supported and making progress and achieving their learning goals [9].

Noels [13] found a positive correlation between high intrinsic motivation and greater persistence, as well as higher levels of success among second language learners. This highlights the importance of intrinsic motivation as a predictor of long-term learning outcomes. Ushioda [14] particularly emphasized the role of personal goals and the development of learner identity in sustaining intrinsic motivation over time. This suggests that connecting language learning to what personally matters to the learner is crucial. Hassan et al. [12] maintained that intrinsic motivation among non-English-major students was significantly enhanced in learning environments having rich opportunities for communication and innovations to address different learners' demands and challenges.

2. Methods

This study employs a qualitative approach, with data collected through in-depth interviews involving 12 English teachers and 17 non-English-major students across eight major programs at a higher education institution in Vietnam. The participants were selected using a purposeful sampling method to ensure rich and relevant data. Criteria for the selection of teachers included: having at least three years of experience teaching English at the university, currently teaching non-English-major students, and being willing to reflect on their instructional practices. Criteria for the selection of students included: being enrolled in a major program rather than English, having completed at least one compulsory English course at the institution, and demonstrating varying levels of engagement and performance in English learning as identified through teacher recommendation. Participation in the study was entirely voluntary, and written consent was obtained from all participants prior to the interviews. To ensure anonymity, the teachers were coded as T1 to T12 and the students as S1 to S17.

The semi-structured interview format allowed for flexibility, enabling the researchers to explore emerging topics beyond the prepared set of questions. Follow-up questions were used to delve further into participants' opinions. The interviews, lasted between 30 to 45 minutes and recorded for later transcription, were conducted either face-to-face or via Google Meet, depending on the participants' convenience. Responses were analyzed with thematic analysis following Braun et al. [15]'s six-phase framework to uncover key themes and deeper insights into students' viewpoints. All data were transcribed and coded manually, with codes and corresponding excerpts systematically recorded and organized in an Excel spreadsheet to facilitate sorting, retrieval, and refinement of themes. To ensure reliability, a subset of transcripts was independently coded by two researchers, and discrepancies were discussed until consensus was reached. The data collection process took place in March and April 2025.

3. Finding and discussion

3.1. *Intrinsic motivation driven by personal growth, enjoyment, and self-determined goals*

The interviewed students mentioned how their English performance was tied to how much time they invested, how they managed competing academic demands, or whether they had a structured study plan. They made improvements in their study because they chose to prioritize English learning and adopt more intentional strategies.

“Well, in recent semesters, my English grades have improved a bit. I think this happened because I've spent more time studying English.” (S1)

“I've participated more in extracurricular activities organized by the school, and I also have an English study group. I believe it's the consistent daily effort that has helped me make academic progress.” (S4)

“I think this improvement is thanks to my active participation in some of the school's English clubs. The club exchange sessions have helped me improve my communication skills and become more confident in speaking.” (S5)

“I've changed the way I manage my study time more effectively and have taken part in extracurricular activities organized by the school as well as in various clubs.” (S6)

The feeling of effectiveness in learning through regular practice and efficient time use reflect students' desire to develop stronger English competence. They also attributed progress with self-directed decisions for learning such as joining English clubs, participating in extracurricular activities, or actively seeking opportunities to practice and receive feedback in low-pressure settings (interactions with peers, for example). Some students reflected on their English development in terms of skill growth, confidence, or self-awareness, even if their scores remained stable. These students evaluated their progress based on internal benchmarks (such as improved planning, more speaking confidence, etc.) rather than solely on grades.

"When they spoke English and I felt that I could understand what they were saying, I felt happy and motivated to keep learning." (S14)

"My English grades usually improve in the second half of the semester. That's because by then I've gotten used to the lecturer's teaching style, and due to the pressure of grades, I tend to focus more on studying so that by the end of the course, I can achieve higher scores." (S9)

The answers suggest that students associate success in their English learning with self-management and planning (autonomy), club participation and social support (relatedness), and perceived skill growth (competence). Those who reported greater motivation and improvement are those who felt their psychological needs well supported. In contrast, students who described experiencing stress, a lack of planning, or disengagement often showed limited or stagnant learning outcomes, suggesting that their psychological needs were not sufficiently met.

"My English grades dropped compared to last semester. I think it's because English is getting more difficult, so I couldn't keep up with the lectures. Also, I had many subjects to study last semester, so I didn't have time to study English additionally." (S3)

"I feel that I haven't made much progress because I don't have enough time to practice due to my busy class schedule." (S11)

"I think the reason is that I don't have a clear study plan, and I've only been focusing on my major subjects, so I haven't spent much time studying English." (S12)

A couple of students expressed that their motivation for learning the English language stemmed from its relevance to their lives and the enjoyment they derived from engaging with the language in meaningful ways. Rather than viewing English solely as an academic requirement, they saw it as a gateway to future opportunities such as securing better jobs, studying abroad, or connecting with international communities.

"I usually watch English movies and listen to English songs... They make learning more enjoyable and help me improve my listening skills without feeling too pressured." (S16)

"I find English quite important - important for my studies, for my future, and for my job later on as well..." (S14)

"I want to increase my chances of getting a good job in the future... and I also want to connect with international friends." (S16)

This forward-looking mindset, grounded in self-defined goals, reflects a strong sense of personal value and autonomy in their learning. At the same time, students highlighted the role of enjoyment in sustaining their motivation. They reported being more engaged when learning involved watching movies, listening to music, playing games, or participating in fun classroom activities. Together, these insights suggest that intrinsic motivation in English learning is strengthened when students can both envision the long-term benefits of language proficiency and enjoy the immediate process of learning through activities that are personally meaningful and emotionally rewarding. These findings once again reinforce previous research which pointed out the value of connecting language learning with personal goals and applying participatory teaching methods [4], [12], [14]. In line with Self-Determination Theory, these results underscore that autonomy, competence, and relatedness are most powerfully nurtured when English learning simultaneously supports learners' self-endorsed goals and offers intrinsically enjoyable experience. Unfortunately, current practice in many contexts still falls short, signaling a need for pedagogical approaches that integrate both elements more deliberately.

3.2. Fostering intrinsic motivation through student-centered and engaging teaching approaches

Teaching approaches that emphasize student engagement, interaction, and enjoyment in English learning are essential for fostering intrinsic motivation [2], [12], [16]. The interviewed teachers reported they intentionally designed choice-rich and interactive activities, such as games, role-plays, and student-led presentations, that allow students to express themselves, participate actively, and take ownership of their learning. These methods fulfill students' need for autonomy by creating opportunities for self-expression and decision-making within classroom tasks, rather than limiting them to rigid, teacher-led formats.

"I usually teach by combining lectures with group activities such as presentations and language games. I also use video materials and English songs to increase student engagement. I find these methods very interesting and effective, especially in improving students' listening and speaking skills. However, I think there should be more writing practice exercises because students' writing skills are quite weak." (T1)

"I combine theory lectures with group practice exercises. I often have students play Kahoot or Quizizz to review lessons and offer bonus points. My class really enjoys this learning method, as shown by how hard they study to earn those bonus points." (T7)

"Sometimes I divide the class into groups, and when we reach a new chapter, each group prepares a PowerPoint presentation. The group is responsible for researching the chapter, finding new vocabulary, and creating games to help the class learn those words—for example, a picture guessing game. At the end of the game, the group gives out a prize. I find that students are quite engaged in these sessions." (T9)

"Recently, I've been teaching an English course for marketing majors, and I had the students practice a method called shadowing. I noticed that they really enjoyed it and actively tried to imitate the native speakers' intonation." (T3)

At the same time, teachers focused on building students' sense of competence through scaffolded learning. Strategies like combining vocabulary and grammar instruction with games using shadowing techniques or leveraging popular media helped create low-pressure, enjoyable settings for practice. However, in large classes where the high number of students made it difficult to provide individual feedback teachers often relied on group work to manage correction, though they acknowledged that even group feedback could not address all learners' specific needs. A learning environment with these characteristics as described by Dörnyei [8] allowed students to experience success incrementally, reinforcing their belief in their own learning ability, a critical component of competence. Teachers also recognized skill gaps, especially in speaking and writing and responded by increasing relevant practice, further contributing to students' perceived mastery.

"I usually start the lesson by introducing new vocabulary, followed by practice exercises. I think this method helps students grasp grammar more firmly and use vocabulary more flexibly." (T5)

"I combine teaching theory with assigning exercises. However, since the class is large, I often can't correct all the students' work. I divide them into groups, but I feel that even group feedback doesn't allow for detailed correction." (T11)

"I organize activities such as games, or I use online games myself. Many students enjoy listening to music and watching movies in English, so if the activities are designed to match their interests, they'll be more engaged. That way, they can expand their vocabulary, practice pronunciation, and improve their listening comprehension skills." (T12)

"I usually start the class with a warm-up game, and during the lesson, I often have students work in groups or pairs. I've noticed that their speaking skills are weak, so they need a lot of speaking practice." (T10)

Low-pressure environments can be facilitated through pair work, group discussions, and team-based games, encouraging students to use English with their peers. Collaborative learning atmospheres and positive peer interactions make students feel connected and supported, which can reduce anxiety and promote greater willingness to learn. Teachers also reflected on the value of empathy and attentiveness

to students' personal preferences in maintaining motivational learning climates. This responsiveness not only acknowledged individual differences in learning styles but also fostered a stronger sense of relatedness - a core component of Self-Determination Theory. By adapting activities to students' preferences and creating opportunities for shared participation, these teachers strengthened social bonds in the classroom, which in turn supported students' motivation and engagement.

"I think each student fits a different learning method, so we need to take the time to explore which teaching approaches work best. I often organize games because they help bring everyone together when students see others participating, they also want to join in and contribute." (T2)

"I use a variety of teaching methods such as group work, games, and presentation assignments. I believe we need diverse and engaging approaches to help students learn English more effectively." (T6)

Overall, by supporting autonomy (via student-led tasks and choices), competence (through accessible, motivating tasks), and relatedness (via cooperative activities), the teachers in this study under research have created learning environments conducive to intrinsic motivation. Together, these practices reflect more than just good teaching techniques, they suggest a pedagogical shift from traditional content transmission toward student-centered, motivationally supportive instruction. Rather than focusing solely on language knowledge, teachers intentionally structured environments that satisfy students' psychological needs, ultimately encouraging deeper engagement and long-term learning. This approach further reinforces the idea that when learners feel autonomous, competent, and socially connected, they are more likely to develop intrinsic motivation, which sustains both effort and enjoyment in language learning beyond the classroom.

3.3. The need for more experiential and contextualized English learning opportunities

Although the teachers reported efforts to implement a variety of pedagogical strategies aiming at engaging and motivating students, the student interviewees expressed a desire for more participatory and practice-oriented learning experiences. They hoped for more opportunities to actively use English in meaningful contexts, both inside and outside the classroom. Their feedback highlights not a contradiction but a call for greater emphasis on real-life language application and learner involvement. This also echoes previous research that has highlighted the importance of the relevance of learning materials and integration of learners' needs [17]. Without opportunities to use the language in practical situations, learners may struggle to understand the relevance of what they learn to their life. Indeed, students struggle more with rigid curricula and textbooks that have low applicability [18]. Students suggested more contextualized practice, such as public speaking events, games tied to everyday vocabulary, or thematic workshops tailored to professional or personal purposes.

"I think the school should organize English-speaking contests, as that would be a good way for students to practice their speaking skills. Additionally, there should be more extracurricular courses to help students practice and strengthen their skills." (S5)

"Since my English isn't very good, I don't have many suggestions. But objectively speaking, I think learning English is easier when it's applied in real-life contexts it's easier to remember and internalize that way. For example, in the workplace, English for specific purposes or everyday communication using short and simple sentences... in those situations, we need to find English that fits our goals and needs. There's no shortage of materials or websites that provide the vocabulary we need. I think the most important thing when learning English is to learn it when necessary and apply it immediately in real situations." (S9)

"I think our school needs to organize more workshops or small seminars so that students can be exposed to different learning methods. In addition, there should be more real-world practice opportunities through field trips or interactions with foreigners." (S4)

"I feel most motivated to learn English in a comfortable and positive learning environment. And I also enjoy classes where the teacher creates a friendly atmosphere and also encourages students to speak up without fear of making mistakes. And also more interested when there are a

variety of activities like games, group discussions, role-plays and even better when the lessons include real-life situations, because they make learning more practical and meaningful." (S16)

These responses also imply that students are increasingly aware of the communicative nature of language learning, that is, learning is most powerful when rooted in specific communicative contexts, like traveling, working, or socializing (S11, S12). This is echoed in S15 and S16's reflections, where they highlight learning English for personal goals, such as using academic English or understanding everyday phrases at work.

"I think the school should organize smaller classes and include more real-life communication activities or exchange sessions with foreigners so that non-English majors have more opportunities to practice." (S11)

"I think the school should offer more level-based courses tailored to different groups of students. Using technology like language-learning games or interactive apps would also increase engagement and improve learning outcomes." (S12)

"I think we should listen to ourselves what we like. For example, if we like a certain aspect of English, we should pursue that. Whether it's academic English, conversational English, or something else, we should follow that interest. Personally, I find classes at school quite boring. So overall, I think listening to yourself is better." (S15)

Indeed, the interviewed students explicitly pointed out a gap between theoretical, classroom-based learning and the real-life use of English. They expressed a strong desire for more experiential, hands-on, and contextually meaningful learning opportunities – a clear call for English learning that extends beyond textbooks and grammar drills. They suggested that real-life practice opportunities, such as speaking with native speakers, engaging in English clubs, participating in role-plays, field trips, or using English in authentic settings, are most useful for them. In their view, English is not just as an academic subject, but also a tool for communication in real-world contexts. Their recommendations indicate that educators should organize learning activities that mirror the principles of experiential learning and task-based language teaching (TBLT).

This theme underscores a widespread student desire for English learning that is experiential, contextualized, and deeply connected to real-world use. Students want to practice language in meaningful, purposeful ways, not just to memorize rules or to pass exams. Their responses suggest that when English is embedded in authentic experiences – such as interaction with native speakers, role-playing, or content tailored to real-life scenarios – motivation, retention, and confidence significantly improve. Addressing this need calls for a pedagogical reorientation from form-focused instruction to experience-driven learning, where language use and real-world relevance are placed at the heart of the curriculum.

Overall, the students' voices make it clear that intrinsic motivation in English learning is nurtured through an experiential and contextualized learning environment since it enables their psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness that are foundational for intrinsic motivation sustainability. Rather than relying on grades or rigid curricula, which might negatively impact learning motivation, students in this study indicated that they are more engaged and motivated when learning feels relevant to their lives and responsive to their experiences. For educational institutions and teachers, this suggests a shift toward more student-centered approaches is key to enhancing both motivation and learning outcomes.

4. Conclusion

The findings of this study suggest that a focus on supporting the basic psychological needs of Self-Determination Theory (autonomy, competence, relatedness) can enhance intrinsic motivation for English learners. Teachers can incorporate more interactive, communicative and practical lessons and activities such as group discussions, role-plays, language games, and real-life communicative tasks. The use of audiovisual resources such as movies, music, podcasts, and street interview videos should be encouraged and meaningfully integrated. Moreover, it is

essential to link learning to students' experiences and interests since this helps students see the relevance of English to their main fields of study, future careers, or personal life. Teachers can use English materials related to students' majors or design tasks requiring English use in real-world contexts (e.g., researching for major-related projects in English, presenting their favorite topics in English, etc.). Allowing choices is a way for teachers to make learning relevant to students, not to mention increasing learning responsibility and autonomy.

Overall, even though this study reveals some interesting insights into factors that affect intrinsic motivation of young adult English learners, it has pointed out the roles of the two important players of this process. With the teachers as the supporters of this process, they can help by detaching from traditional teaching approaches toward more student-centered, experiential and contextualized methods. Students who want to succeed in the learning of the language should be more self-determined, gain control of their learning, take more responsibilities, and autonomy in learning. Future research could further reinforce these findings with a larger size of informant, employing mixed methods to enrich data for analysis, or employing a longitudinal research design to help better understand changes in motivation as learners progress with their learning.

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