

Hatixhe LEKA¹

Elvana SHTËPANI²

Exploring Motivational Drivers and Goal-Achievement Strategies among University Students

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Abstract

This article aims to explore the complex and often overlooked topic of motivation within the educational setting, particularly in the context of students learning English as a second language (ESL). By focusing on both student and educator perspectives, the study highlights how motivation is perceived, addressed, and sometimes neglected. The investigation is limited to classroom-based experiences and interactions, allowing for a focused analysis of the teaching environment. Despite the clear importance of motivation in language learning, many educators find it challenging to maintain or stimulate, while students themselves often struggle to stay engaged. These difficulties contribute to a mutual neglect of the issue, hindering learning outcomes. The article argues for a more organized and reflective approach to motivation, one that involves analyzing individual learning needs, responding to them effectively, and improving both knowledge and performance. Drawing on relevant literature and empirical observations, the study seeks to propose practical solutions to common motivational challenges in the pedagogical context and support more effective teaching and learning strategies.

Keywords: *Effective Teaching, Learning Outcomes, Learning Strategies, Motivation, the Teaching Environment*

¹ Department of English, Faculty of Foreign Languages, University of Tirana, Email: hatixhe.sejdini@unitir.edu.al

² Department of English, Faculty of Foreign Languages, University of Tirana, Email: elvana.shtepani@unitir.edu.al

INTRODUCTION

Human behavior has long been subject of study, as its understanding is key to comprehending how we perceive and interact with reality. Educators, researchers, methodologists, psychoanalysts have long tried to understand the individual's behaviour which underlies the fulfillment of various tasks and responsibilities across professional and personal contexts. Maier posits that human behavior can be effectively analyzed through a systematic examination of contributing factors, arguing that an objective assessment can yield meaningful insights. Alongside many psychoanalytic researchers, Maier identifies motivation as a critical component in this chain of behaviour affecting elements. By highlighting its significance, scholars underscore that human actions are driven by diverse and often complex motivational sources.

Researchers Cathryn Wentzel and Allan Wigfield³ integrate psychological theories with practical classroom applications, helping educators foster engagement and achievement. *Expectancy-Value theory* developed by Wigfield and Eccles⁴, points to the fact that student motivation depends on two key factors: expectancy, belief in one's ability to succeed and value, perceived importance of the task. Wigfield identifies four types of task value: intrinsic (enjoyment), utility (usefulness), attainment (personal significance) and cost (effort required). Studies show that when students feel that their work is relevant they believe that they can succeed, by fostering in this way their deeper engagement.

For example, Wigfield's 2020 study⁵ found that utility-value interventions—where teachers explicitly connect lessons to real-world applications—increased engagement by 12%.

On the other hand, Wentzel's work emphasizes *social relationships* as a critical driver of motivation. She found that students work harder when they feel their teachers genuinely care and their peers respect them. Her research highlights the importance of teacher warmth combined with high expectations, a balance that creates an optimal learning environment.

Both researchers stress the importance of goal setting in sustaining motivation. Wentzel concludes that effective goals should be specific, appropriately difficult, and personally meaningful. Wigfield's studies further show that mastery-oriented goals, focused on learning rather than grades, lead to deeper engagement.

³ Wentzel K. & Wigfield A. (2016) *Handbook of Motivation at School* (2nd ed.) Taylor and Francis. 1-8

⁴ Wigfield A, Eccles J.S 2000. *Expectancy Value theory of achievement motivation*, p.68-81 Volume 25, Issue 1, 68-81, ISSN 0361-476X, <https://doi.org/10.1006/ceps.1999.1015>.

⁵ Eccles, J. S., & Wigfield, A. (2020). *From expectancy-value theory to situated expectancy-value theory: A developmental, social cognitive, and sociocultural perspective on motivation*. Contemporary Educational Psychology, Volume 61. 101859, ISSN 0361-476X, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cedpsych.2020.101859>

While Wigfield underlies the importance of task value John Marshall Reeve in his Self-Determination Theory (SDT)⁶ focuses on student motivation, engagement, and teacher-student relationships. His research provides insights into how teachers can create autonomy-supportive classrooms that foster intrinsic motivation, persistence, and deeper learning.

Reeve's research shows that when teachers adopt an autonomy-supportive approach, rather than a controlling one, students experience:

- Higher intrinsic motivation (learning for its own sake)
- Greater engagement (effort, attention, persistence)
- Improved academic performance (grades, conceptual understanding)

What teachers do while approaching their students in this way is:

offer meaningful choices such as topic selection and try to always answer *the "why"* behind tasks.

He identifies the interconnectedness between teacher's and students' motivation and emphasizes that teachers' own motivation affects their teaching style:

- Autonomy-supported teachers are more likely to support students' autonomy.
- Controlled teachers, pressured by rigid curricula/testing, tend to adopt a controlling style, reducing student engagement.

He concludes that schools should empower teachers with professional autonomy, so that engagement is fostered, encouragement of students to ask questions, suggest improvements, and take initiative.

The *Integrated Model of Domain Learning (IMDL)* of Murphy & Alexander⁷ explains how motivation evolves as students gain expertise in a subject. In their research great importance is placed to motivational approaches at different stages. Their framework suggests that teachers should rely on *external rewards* such as grades at early learning stages and smoothly shift to *intrinsic interest* and deeper engagement on later stages. To address motivational issues a distinction between knowledge and interest should be made first. P. Karen Murphy & Patricia A. Alexander distinguish between:

Surface-level knowledge (motivated by grades/compliance).

Deep understanding (driven by curiosity and mastery goals).

So, they identify key factors such as:

⁶ Reeve, J. (2012). *A self-determination theory perspective on student engagement*, Handbook of Research on Student engagement, 149-172.

⁷ Murphy, P. K., & Alexander, P. A. (2006). *Understanding how students learn: A guide for instructional leaders*. Corwin Press.

1. The *Role of teachers' beliefs*, their own views about intelligence (fixed vs. growth mindset) shape how they motivate students.
2. The *Social Context of Motivation* according to which peer comparison can *boost* motivation (friendly competition) or *harm* it (shame/self-doubt).

Practical, research-based strategies to motivate students are the focus of Barbara R. Blackburn's theory⁸. Her work emphasizes rigor, relevance, and relationships as key drivers of student engagement. Blackburn argues that all students can achieve success when teachers set challenging yet attainable goals paired with support. For example, instead of lowering standards for struggling learners, teachers should break tasks into smaller steps while maintaining high expectations.

Connecting lessons to students' lives to boost motivation is key to success according to her. Blackburn's research shows that relevance increases effort and persistence.

She promotes autonomy by allowing students to choose topics, project formats, or assessment methods and similarly to Wentzel, Blackburn highlights teacher-student relationships as motivational tools. Simple actions, greeting students by name, acknowledging their interests, or offering encouragement, can significantly impact engagement.

The work of Eric and Lynley Anderman⁹ bridges theory and practice in student motivation. It integrates *achievement goal theory*, *self-efficacy*, and *classroom* context to explain how instructional environments shape motivation. Their achievement goal theory provides critical insights into how students' fundamental orientations toward learning shape their academic behaviors and outcomes. Their work distinguishes between two primary goal orientations that operate in educational settings:

1. mastery goals and 2. performance goals.

Mastery goals, which are task-focused, lead students to concentrate on developing genuine competence and understanding of material. When students adopt mastery goals, they typically engage more deeply with content, willingly tackle challenging problems, and persist through difficulties because their primary aim is personal growth and learning. This orientation fosters *intrinsic motivation* and creates resilient learners who view mistakes as valuable feedback rather than as failures.

⁸ Blackburn Barbara R. (2015), *Motivating Struggling Learners, Ten ways to build student success*, Routledge.

⁹ Anderman, E. M., & Anderman, L. H. (2020). *Classroom motivation* (3rd ed.). Routledge. Chapters 4-6

In contrast, performance goals represent an ego-focused approach where students primarily aim to demonstrate their ability relative to others. While this orientation can sometimes drive achievement, it frequently leads to problematic outcomes. Students focused on performance goals may resort to surface-level learning strategies and avoid challenging tasks that might reveal limitations, or experience high levels of anxiety about assessments. The classroom implications of this distinction are profound - teachers who emphasize mastery-oriented language cultivate more productive learning mindsets than those who stress performance outcomes.

The Andermans' examination of classroom goal structures reveals how institutional policies and teaching practices collectively establish motivational environments that either support or undermine student engagement. Mastery-structured classrooms are characterized by specific features that promote healthy motivation: mistakes are normalized as essential to learning, assessments emphasize progress over perfection, and the teacher's feedback focuses on effort and strategy rather than comparative achievement. In such environments, students develop mindsets and are more willing to take intellectual risks.

Conversely, performance-structured classrooms that emphasize rankings, standardized testing, and perfect scores tend to create anxiety and disengagement, particularly among struggling students. The Andermans provide concrete examples of how subtle shifts in teacher language can transform classroom climate. Rather than highlighting the distribution of grades ("Only five students got As"), mastery-oriented teachers direct attention to individual progress ("Let's examine how everyone's thesis statements strengthened between drafts"). This approach helps all students see themselves as capable learners on a developmental continuum.

They identify academic self-efficacy - students' belief in their capacity to succeed - as a cornerstone of sustained motivation. Their research demonstrates that students with strong self-efficacy set more ambitious goals, employ better learning strategies, and attribute setbacks to modifiable factors like effort or strategy rather than fixed ability. The Andermans outline specific, actionable strategies teachers can use to develop this crucial belief in students.

These interconnected concepts - achievement goals, classroom structures, and self-efficacy, form a comprehensive framework for understanding and enhancing student motivation. By implementing these evidence-based approaches, educators can help shift students from performance anxiety to authentic engagement with learning.

Case Study Design: Understanding Student Motivation

Motivation plays a crucial role in academic success, yet students are driven by diverse factors which lead to their intrinsic (personal satisfaction) and extrinsic (rewards, recognition) motivation. This case study investigates students' understanding of the importance of motivation, what motivates them, how they sustain motivation, and the steps they take to be motivated and achieve their goals. Though primarily concerned with students' awareness on the role of motivation, the underlying focus of the study is our understanding of their needs and the adaption of our approach to the various motivating factors. Though, this would be another topic of discussion in our future studies.

Research Objectives:

The present study aimed at seeking answers to the following research questions:

What are the sources of motivation among students?

What strategies do students use to stay motivated?

What challenges do they face in maintaining motivation?

What are the differences in motivation between high-achieving and struggling students?

Research Methodology

Design and Participants:

In our study we employed a questionnaire design which consisted of 2 questionnaires that were administered at different stages of the study and followed by focus group discussions.

The questionnaires consisted mainly of *Open-ended questions* (e.g., "Describe the last time you felt motivated") and only a few *Multiple-choice questions* (e.g., "What motivates you most? Grades, passion, career prospects, peer competition, or family expectations?").

The questionnaire was selected as the primary method due to its effectiveness in capturing objective responses within educational setting. The research focused on three university groups each consisting of respectively 25, 22, 24 students, resulting in a total of 71 participants. These participants were undergraduate students in their second and third years of study at the university. The selection of these groups aimed to provide a representative sample of students at this academic level, ensuring a balanced perspective on the behaviors and learning practices typical of mixed academic performance levels university learners.

Procedure

Participants were fully informed about the aim of the questionnaire and assured complete anonymity and confidentiality. They were further reassured that their responses would remain entirely uninfluenced, as the researchers refrain from any form of intervention, serving solely

to clarify potential ambiguities or respond to participants queries. During subsequent discussions, students acknowledged that their familiarity with the researchers as their instructors of various subjects contributed to a relaxed and open atmosphere, making them more comfortable completing the questionnaire.

Data Collection instruments

To collect data, worksheets which consisted of questions on motivation were employed. In the first stage they defined motivation and explained what motivates and demotivates them. Once the questionnaires were collected, they had group discussions to share opinions on kinds, Intrinsic: Personal interest, mastery, self-improvement, Extrinsic: Grades, scholarships, job opportunities, parental approval, Social: peer comparison, study groups, and sources of motivation, contributing in this way to create a full picture on motivation and its sources. Data was also collected in the form of field notes which were noted down once the follow-up discussions were over.

The second stage took place the following week, and the students had to complete a task and list motivational or demotivational approaches or practices that contributed or affected in some way the completion of the task.

Data Analysis

Our analysis of the data was primarily a thematic description of motivational sources and approaches. Since it involves identifying and categorizing recurring themes related to what drives students to respond in a certain way especially to open-ended responses, it would allow us to explore intrinsic and extrinsic motivational factors—such as personal goals, social influences, rewards, and self-fulfillment. By doing so, we aimed to identify and reveal patterns in how motivation is experienced across different contexts. Approaches to motivation, such as goal setting, self-determination, or reinforcement strategies, are also thematically examined to understand the preferred or most effective methods used by students while they are working individually or organized in groups. The thorough aided at uncovering the underlying psychological mechanisms and identifying practical applications in education, or personal development.

Findings and Discussions of Findings

Students identified various motivational sources and approaches by reflecting on both their successes and setbacks. They discussed goals they had successfully achieved, outlining the

specific steps they took and the key factors that motivated them throughout the process. Conversely, they also reflected on goals they were unable to reach, describing the initial motivations that sparked their efforts and the factors that eventually led to a decline in motivation. These reflections provide valuable insights into the dynamics of goal setting, persistence, and the internal and external influences that shape motivation over time.

They appreciate various motivational strategies that help them stay focused on their academic and personal goals. These include goal-setting techniques, such as creating SMART goals (specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time-bound) and breaking larger tasks into smaller ones to accomplish step by step. They also value reward systems, friends and mentors who contribute to motivating them to achieve their goals such as tasks, classes, study sessions or achieving milestones, by assisting, rewarding and praising them. They have underlined the fact that they benefit from visualization tools like vision boards and progress trackers, which help them maintain clarity and motivation throughout their journey.

Conversely, negative feedback or criticism causes a student to doubt their abilities, leading them to avoid participating in similar tasks or group assignments in the future. Prejudice from peers is another setback especially for students who lack confidence.

Additionally, students identify as demotivational the lack of immediate results which usually leads them to become discouraged after a few weeks, causing them to stop trying. The lack of progress quickly erodes their motivation.

Furthermore, overwhelming workload leads to stress and a decline in academic performance. So, it is evident that support or encouragement from the teachers, peers, and parents would be the right approach to overcome difficulties. Otherwise, if a student's performance is underestimated, they struggle to stay motivated without external affirmation.

Limitations and recommendations

Students acknowledge that they commonly face motivational challenges that slow down their academic success. Feelings of hesitation, workload, fear of failure, and the absence of clearly defined goals can significantly impact performance, well-being, and persistence, particularly in high-pressure academic environments. Preliminary findings of our study suggest that motivational patterns may vary by discipline—for example, students in the Faculty of Foreign Languages exhibit a stronger reliance on intrinsic motivators and acknowledge the presence of extrinsic motivating approaches.

Such insights hold practical implications for educators, offering opportunities to design more targeted, evidence-based interventions aimed at fostering intrinsic motivation and goal-directed

behavior. However, we identify self-reporting bias and small, potentially non-representative samples as limitations of our study. As a preliminary study the limited, non-representative sample restricts the generalizability of findings to broader student populations across disciplines or institutions. To enhance the validity and applicability of future research, we aim at conducting a longitudinal study to extend this preliminary case study over time to examine how student motivation evolves over time, alongside interventions that assess the efficacy of motivational support approaches or mechanisms.

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