

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH AND GERMAN STUDIES

**Creating Supportive Classroom Environments:
Motivating Adolescent Students in English as a Second
Language**

Treball de Fi de Grau/ BA dissertation

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Abstract

Motivation has been recognised as one of the most influential factors affecting academic performance and language learning processes (Dörnyei, 2001). When adolescent students study a language that is not official in their environment, their performance and motivation might be challenged. The aim of this paper is to explore the multiple aspects that influence motivation during adolescence in academic contexts, in particular focusing on English as a second language (ESL), and to identify strategies through which teachers promote a more supportive and motivating classroom environment. A theoretical background on adolescent motivation and second language acquisition (SLA) settings is provided in order to contextualise how supportive classrooms along with the role of high school teachers either foster or hinder motivation. Conclusions drawn from the literature review demonstrate that by fulfilling the three psychological needs in Ryan and Deci's (2000) Self-Determination Theory (SDT) —autonomy, competence, and relatedness— students engage more easily and effectively in class, which results in increased levels of both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. To achieve this increased motivation, psychological and instructional strategies need to be adopted in ESL classrooms, with teachers serving as main facilitators in the delivery and reinforcing motivational support.

Keywords: motivation, adolescent students, teachers, ESL, supportive classroom, psychological strategies, instructional strategies.

1. Introduction

In the field of Second Language Acquisition (SLA), individual differences have consistently been recognised as crucial factors in determining the success of language learning. Among these differences, previous research demonstrates that motivation and attitude stand out as some of the most influential elements, having a significant impact on language outcomes (Dörnyei, 2001). Language learning, however, is not always optional but obligatory, especially for adolescents. When this second language (L2) is part of a compulsory subject, motivation, or the lack of it, and other negative feelings may arise. English, for instance, is the most commonly learned L2. It is due to this unique status of English that public school systems have incorporated the teaching of English into mainstream elementary and secondary obligatory curriculum—for instance, according to the Ministry of Education and Vocational Training (n.d.), the goal in Spain is a B1 at the end of high school—. This shift in foreign language teaching also shifts the responsibility partially onto the teachers as well as the students' (Eccles & Roeser, 2009). For this reason, this final degree project aims to explore the key factors that shape adolescents' motivation when learning English as a second language (ESL), with a particular focus on how academic motivation can be fostered through a supportive classroom that acknowledges students' interests and needs, as well as through the psychological and instructional strategies employed by teachers.

This project analyses the pivotal role teachers play in the task of motivating adolescent students when facing ESL and the different strategies that can be employed in order to foster students' successful acquisition of the language. Adolescent students undergo a sensitive developmental stage in which academic motivation is vulnerable to both internal and external factors. Nevertheless, innovative instructional approaches —

such as gamification and self-evaluation tests— as well as psychological strategies — including autonomy-supportive teaching and positive feedback— have been shown to foster the students’ intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, resulting in greater language outcomes (McClelland et al., 2017; Chong & Reinders, 2020). To illustrate this connection, a theoretical background on motivation, supportive environment, and their consequences on adolescent learners is provided, to also clarify the position of each factor in the field. Following this, various in-class strategies of English language teaching (ELT) are reviewed to emphasise the important role teachers play in fostering students’ academic motivation, as well as to provide some practical advice that educators could adopt in their classrooms.

2. Background on motivation

2.1 Academic motivation in the adolescence

Adolescence is a crucial developmental stage marked by significant cognitive, emotional, and social changes. During this period, as adolescents mature, they feel the need to seek autonomy, to form new relationships, and to explore both the external world and their own identities. Research by scholars such as Eccles and Roeser (2009) and Dörnyei (2001) suggests that each of these factors, as well as both internal and external influences shape adolescents’ perceptions and relations with the extraneous world, which, in turn, affects their engagement and persistence in every task they engage in.

Motivation is thought to be one of the most influential individual difference factors in academic contexts. However, defining this concept is challenging, as it encompasses multiple dimensions and theoretical perspectives. Ryan and Deci (2000) argue that motivation is not simply “to be moved to do something” (p.54), but a complex

construct influenced by numerous factors, both internal and external. Thus, motivation has been identified as multifaceted, and researchers such as Gardner (1985) and Ryan and Deci (2000) have identified internal and external factors that can either drive or diminish motivation. These factors have become known as intrinsic and extrinsic. Although these concepts will be explored in greater depth in the following section, it is important to underscore that both intrinsic motivation —kind of motivation driven by internal forces and influences — and extrinsic motivation —driven by external incentives—have a major impact on students' persistence and engagement in academic tasks.

Beyond motivation, the concept of amotivation —a state characterised by futility, disinterest, and inertia— has been a key focus in educational research. Symonds et al. (2019) studied the development of motivation and amotivation across critical educational transitions during adolescence and young adulthood. Amotivation, defined as a lack of purpose, interest, or belief in one's ability, was found to decrease over time, whereas motivation increased across both mid-schooling transition and the school-to-work transition. Notably, reductions in disinterest and inertia were more pronounced among students entering vocational education at the mid-schooling transition. These findings suggest that as students mature and gain a clearer sense of orientation, they become more motivated, particularly when they transition into environments aligned with their interests and aspirations. This underscores the importance of personalised educational environments and the impact of normative maturational and social changes on motivation development during these critical periods.

Still, adolescents navigate through several important emotional and physical changes, and adolescents' motivation may fluctuate according to factors such as their emotional state, life experiences, and even seasonal influences, hindering their

engagement in certain tasks and making academic success more difficult to achieve. A key reason for this is that the adolescent brain undergoes significant maturation until they reach adulthood. Research suggests that an adolescent's brain has a different perception of intentional understanding compared to an adult's brain (Blakemore et al., 2007), which means they approach challenges in unique ways. A central concept to understand adolescent social cognition is Theory of Mind (ToM), which refers to "the ability to represent and understand mental states, intentions, and of others, and to predict one's own and others' behaviour" (Meinhardt-Injac, Daum & Meindhart, 2020, p. 290). This theory is fundamental to understanding how individuals connect with one another. Two key components of ToM are underscored: cognitive ToM, which involves the ability to reason about other's knowledge and intentions, and affective ToM, which refers to the ability to infer other's emotions. Meinhardt-Injac's research highlights that the adolescent brain is in a state of formation, and this causes some functions such as the affective and the cognitive ToM be under constant refinement over the years but being specially developed in the adolescence. Moreover, these brain developments —primarily affecting the medial prefrontal cortex (mPFC) and the temporoparietal junction (TPJ)— contribute to enhanced social reasoning skills. While adolescents initially rely more on egocentric perspectives, they gradually shift toward more sophisticated social reasoning, improving their ability to deduce others' motivations and predict behaviour (Blackmore et al., 2007). Because of these developmental differences, adolescents' learning processes can diverge significantly from those of adults. If these changes are not properly considered in the ESL classroom, the ability of adolescents to acquire knowledge effectively may be compromised.

In addition to cognitive and social development, seasonal influences have been shown to impact adolescents' motivation and well-being. Research has demonstrated that Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD) is not limited only to adults but also affects children and young adults, potentially disrupting their daily routines, social interaction and overall engagement in academic tasks. SAD symptoms in youth typically manifest as recurrent seasonal depressive episodes, mainly emerging in winter, fall and sometimes spring. These symptoms can include low mood, fatigue, hypersomnia, social withdrawal, but above all, lower energy, increased irritability, and greater difficulty concentrating and maintaining productivity (Rosenthal et al., 1986; Carskadon & Acebo, 1993). Although this may apply to every individual, adolescents may struggle in academia due to this disorder, making academic achievement even more difficult and reducing their level of motivation.

2.2 Motivation in SLA

There are several key theories of SLA that shed light on how motivation influences success in learning ESL. One of the most influential is Self-Determination Theory (SDT) (Ryan & Deci, 2000), which distinguishes between two specific orientations of motivation: intrinsic and extrinsic. Intrinsic motivation refers to the motivation that is driven by the person's own goals and interests, as well as by self-satisfaction and enjoyment, rather than external pressures such as rewards. Intrinsic motivation is often associated with enhanced learning outcomes, as it fosters deeper engagement and long-term retention (Gardner, 1985). Extrinsic motivation, on the other hand, is influenced by external factors such as social pressure or approval, rewards and punishments. While extrinsic motivation has been criticised for potentially undermining intrinsic motivation, SDT argues that it is not inherently negative. When external regulations are internalised

—meaning they align with an individual’s personal aims and goals— extrinsic motivation can function in ways similar to intrinsic motivation and be beneficial to implement new routines, find new interests, and sustain proper behaviour toward new challenges. In SLA contexts, these two orientations of motivation are crucial to achieve a sustained level of motivation.

A central aspect of SDT is its emphasis on three innate psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Autonomy refers to the feeling of control over one’s actions, competence relates to the belief in one’s ability to succeed, and relatedness involves the sense of connection to others (deCharms, 1968; Harter, 1978; Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Unlike motivation based on external influences, these factors operate internally, and, when satisfied, they enhance self-motivation and psychological well-being. Conversely, when any of these needs are thwarted, it can lead to diminished motivation and disengagement, having negative consequences on numerous domains, for instance in health care, work, sports, and education. In adolescents, the fulfillment of these needs is crucial, as it shapes their motivation and success in learning. Motivation, in this sense, is not a fixed trait but a dynamic response to social environments and psychological needs.

Human nature can fluctuate between active or passive, and constructive or indolent. These characteristics are not only a biological factor but a response and reaction to the support to controlling nature of the surroundings. Particularly in ESL classrooms, learners are more likely to be self-motivated, energised, and engaged when they are in learning environments that foster autonomy, competence and social connection.

Therefore, it is crucial that these needs are satisfied to succeed in the acquisition of English and to avoid negatively affecting students' progress.

Building on this basic understanding of psychological needs, it is crucial to explore how their satisfaction—or lack thereof— translates into tangible motivational outcomes in language learning. Ryan and Deci (2000) outline three major factors at play of SDT: intrinsic motivation, self-regulation and the impact of psychological need fulfillment on well-being. These outcomes are closely interrelated. Intrinsic motivation, which is driven by enjoyment in the task itself, fosters self-regulation, which is the ability of students to manage their own learning, set goals, and stay motivated even when there is not a constant monitoring of the learning process. Well-being, in turn, is tied to emotional and psychological health, emphasising that motivation is not only about performance but personal growth and resilience. Ryan and Deci also highlight some negative consequences when these needs are not met, for example passivity, alienation, and psychopathology. When learners perceive that their environment does not support their psychological achievements, their efforts tend to diminish and may begin to internalise a sense of incompetence, ultimately leading to withdrawal from learning activities.

To further explore how intrinsic motivation is nurtured, specifically in the context of SLA, Ryan and Deci introduced a sub-theory within SDT, known as Cognitive Evaluation Theory (CET). CET focuses on the social-contextual events—feedback, communications, rewards—that influence intrinsic motivation. This perspective is particularly important in language learning, where students often face increased levels of vulnerability and uncertainty. CET underscores the crucial role of parents and teachers in

creating environments that support rather than undermine a learner's sense of autonomy, competence and relatedness in such settings.

One of the most influential scholars in SLA motivation is Robert Gardner. He was one of the pioneers who applied motivational theory specifically to SLA. He introduced a new model; the Socio-Educational Model (SEM) (Gardner, 1985), which posits that language acquisition is influenced not only by individual motivation but also by the broader social context. He argued that learners' attitudes toward the target language and its speakers significantly impact their success in acquiring the language. If learners have a negative attitude toward the language or its speakers, successful acquisition is less likely. Conversely, a positive attitude fosters motivation and enhances the likelihood of mastering the language. He identified four motivational dimensions: intrinsic motivation, extrinsic motivation, integrative motivation, and instrumental motivation. Intrinsic and extrinsic motivation are described similarly to Ryan and Deci's (2000) SDT. However, Gardner introduced two additional types of motivation specific to SLA: integrative and instrumental motivation. Integrative motivation fosters the inherent desire to learn a language, to know the culture and its speakers, and to acquire an inclusive worldview while creating a new identity. In other words, it appeals to self-satisfaction, and it is closely aligned with intrinsic motivation. In the case of ESL, instrumental motivation often manifests as the desire to improve English proficiency for career advancement, academic success, or travel opportunities. Although integrative motivation typically leads to a more enduring commitment and success, instrumental motivation can serve as a powerful motivator in many contexts.

Gardner continued to explore attitude and motivation through the SEM, and how social and educational environments influence language learning. It was found that factors such as cultural background, social support, classroom environment, self-confidence, and anxiety levels, play a crucial role in shaping motivation and learning outcomes. Gardner suggested that cultural beliefs might influence individual differences in achievement, and identified four key variables: i) intelligence, which is the responsible for how well and quickly a task is understood, ii) language aptitude, which is the verbal and cognitive abilities that develop language skills, iii) motivation, understood as effort, want and affect associated with learning a second language, and iv) situational anxiety, which inhibits individual's performance and interferes with language acquisition.

In SLA, learning occurs through both formal instruction such as classroom teaching, and informal experiences, for example social interactions outside educational contexts. Gardner emphasizes the importance of integrativeness in the cultural community as a key predictor of success and describes his model as a “[d]ynamic model in which initial cognitive and affective variables influence an individual's behaviour in the language learning environment, and the interplay of these variables with the context produce non-linguistic outcomes that influence subsequent affective variables in an ever-continuing process” (Gardner, 1985, p. 149). This is especially relevant in ESL classrooms, where learners are involved and immersed in a culturally and linguistically different environment. Moreover, language anxiety is also underscored, which is claimed to be a major obstacle to acquisition, hindering performance and motivation due to a reduction in confidence.

However, understanding how motivation functions in SLA would be incomplete without considering Dörnyei's perspective. While Gardner (1985) focused on the social and cultural dimensions, Dörnyei (2001) integrated the self-concept, complementing both SDT and the SEM. He introduced the L2 Motivational Self System (2001), which emphasised the learner's vision of their future self as a central driver of motivation. For ESL learners, this may involve imagining themselves confidently using English in professional, academic or social settings. The theory highlights the importance of context and emotional climate, suggesting that teachers play a crucial role in shaping student's expectations, strengthening their sense of purpose in language learning.

According to Dörnyei, while motivation is essential for sustained effort and engagement, it does not act in isolation. Factors such as aptitude, context and learning conditions are vitally important. Focusing on SLA in an academic context, Dörnyei explores classroom motivation through four interrelated dimensions, which underscore the pivotal role of teachers and the learning environment: i) creating basic motivational conditions —establishing a positive teacher-student relationship and creating a safe, supportive classroom environment—, ii) generating initial motivation —enhancing learners' intrinsic interest in language learning and increasing the relevance of learning tasks to their goals and interests—, iii) maintaining and protecting motivation —by providing constructive feedback and acknowledging students' progress—, and iv) encouraging self-motivation by promoting autonomy and goal-setting, self-reflection and self-evaluation to help students take ownership of their progress (Dörnyei, 2001). Dörnyei's approach complements Ryan and Deci's SDT by reinforcing the idea that a learner's vision of their future self is a powerful motivational force. However, motivation is also influenced by external expectations and learners' positive or negative experiences

within educational contexts. This highlights the dynamic interplay between personal aspirations, social influences, and classroom environments in shaping motivation for SLA. Teachers are therefore not simply deliverers of content, but active agents of motivational climates that can significantly enhance or hinder L2 development.

2.2.1 Role of the classroom environment

Although the theories discussed above might vary in their terminology and perspectives on motivation, they are all relevant to SLA. Among them, Dörnyei (2001) stands out for explicitly addressing the impact of the learning environment, emphasizing the role of supportive classroom environments in fostering adolescent motivation. Learning a second language in a country where English does not have an official status is particularly challenging due to limited exposure to the target language, meaning that a higher level of motivation is required for successful acquisition (Aiusheeva & Güntur, 2019). In this context, known as English as a foreign language context (EFL), many aspects of the classroom learning environment can either enhance or hinder students' attitudes toward the acquisition of a new language, the most important factors being: relatedness, competence and autonomy.

To better understand how motivation influences language learning in adolescents, it is vital to consider the role of input, which is the language learners are exposed to. Krashen (1982) demonstrated that affective factors such as motivation, self-confidence and anxiety were crucial in the processing of this input. The Affective Filter Hypothesis posits that emotional variables impact how input is processed and internalised, claiming that those learners with more positive attitudes are more open to the input, and that this input is more likely to remain in the student's mind. Conversely, those students who suffer

from stress or anxiety might block input from being effectively processed (Stevick, 1976; Krashen, 1982). Thus, the Affective Filter Hypothesis does not downplay the importance of the input but emphasises that strong affective filters have the greatest influence on the effectiveness of the input. This theory can be directly applied to language learning in the classroom because, by reducing students' affective filters through a supportive environment, language input can be more effectively processed and acquired.

In addition to the emotional factors that play a role in the classroom, the physical layout of the room can directly affect students' language learning motivation and engagement (de Borba, Alves & Campagnolo, 2020). The rearrangement of desks, for example, can significantly impact communication and collaboration among students. Arranging desks in small groups or in U-shapes can ease peer interaction, which is essential for language acquisition. This rearrangement encourages spontaneous conversations, cooperative learning, and a greater willingness to participate. Moreover, an inclusive and well-structured classroom environment fosters a sense of belonging, making students feel more comfortable and confident when engaging in language-related activities. Adaptability and flexibility in classroom spaces are equally important. That is, there should be enough room to modify and adapt seating arrangements according to the diverse speech events that occur in a language classroom, such as lectures, seminars, discussions, and group work. These flexible layouts can also change the social context of classrooms. Adaptable learning spaces can enhance long-term enrollment and engagement, increase attendance, problem-solving, improve conceptual understanding and even lower failing rates (Beichner et al., 2007).

2.3 Practical research on motivation in the adolescence

While theoretical models provide valuable insights into the factors influencing motivation in SLA, empirical research offers concrete evidence on how these theories manifest in real classroom settings. A meta-analysis by Deci et al. (2001) examined the effect of rewards on intrinsic motivation and its implications for educational practice, providing strong empirical support for CET (Deci & Ryan, 1980). Their findings reinforced the argument that different types of rewards can either enhance or undermine intrinsic motivation, depending on the conditions under which they are given. For instance, if students receive a tangible reward, such as a treat whenever they complete a task, they may expect to receive it every time, which may reduce their intrinsic motivation. However, if students are rewarded with positive feedback or verbal praise, their internal confidence and willingness to learn will be reinforced.

In response to previous conclusions drawn by Cameron and Pierce (1994), who claimed that “teachers have no reason to resist implementing incentive systems in the classroom” (Cameron & Pierce, 1994, p. 397), Deci et al. (2001) conducted two hierarchical meta-analyses. The first consisted of 101 experiments that used a free-choice behavioural measure of intrinsic motivation, while the second included 84 studies that measured self-reported interest as the dependent variable. In both cases, the effects of all rewards on intrinsic motivation were calculated and were systematically differentiated by the reward conditions. The type of rewards were categorised according to whether they were expected or unexpected and their relevance to educational contexts. The results demonstrated that verbal rewards tended to enhance intrinsic motivation, while expected tangible rewards, particularly those that were task-contingent, significantly undermined intrinsic motivation. Given that tangible rewards are commonly used in ESL classrooms

in order to motivate students and encourage them to complete tasks, these findings have important implications for educational practice in L2 acquisition cases, especially with English, stressing the need to carefully consider the types and conditions of rewards used to motivate students as they can significantly affect their learning.

In respect to classroom layout and its connection to student engagement, Robert Sommer's (1965) research is particularly interesting. His study involved an experimental introductory psychology class held in rooms specifically selected based on experimental criteria. He measured student participation across different seating arrangement and room type, comparing lab-style setups with seminar-style rooms. The results showed that classroom layout and participation were strongly connected. Notably, students' attitudes and involvement were influenced by their seating position and the physical aspects of the classroom. However, the most comfortable seating arrangements did not always promote the highest levels of participation. Sommer (1965) emphasised that a motivated and imaginative instructor should use less-than-ideal environments successfully by adjusting them to suit different activities. According to the author "it is exceedingly important to teach instructors to use classrooms to their maximal effectiveness. Just as a teacher must learn how to use audio-visual equipment properly, the classroom setting provides many features that can enhance or detract from the daily program." (Sommer, 1965, p.41). In ESL settings, the physical environment of the classroom plays a crucial role in facilitating language acquisition by encouraging interaction and communicative practice in English. Through a classroom layout adaptable to different activities, teachers can not only facilitate the transmission of the information, but also encourage the use of different strategies to acquire the message, such as negotiation of meaning, clarification, or corrective feedback.

3. The teachers' role in fostering motivation

Along with creating a supportive classroom environment, teachers are also instrumental in fostering motivation among ESL adolescent learners. Adolescents, who are undergoing a complex process of identity formation, are particularly sensitive to the social and emotional dynamics around them, making the teacher's impact not only instructional but deeply psychological. Considering that adolescent students spend most of their time at school, their attitudes and personal choices can be highly influenced by two figures: their peers, who often serve as the students' main references, and their teachers, who assume numerous roles in the learners' academic and personal development. Specifically, researchers such as Dörnyei (2001) highlight that teachers function as main motivators, facilitators, and role models for students, and that a consistent teacher enthusiasm and with clear expectations can set the tone for student motivation and their learning orientation. In fact he stated that "a teacher's relationship with their students is the single most important tool" (Dörnyei, 2001, p. 35).

For this purpose, it is essential to consider both psychological strategies —such as teacher-student rapport, autonomy-supportive teaching, positive feedback and self-evaluation tests— and instructional strategies —including group work, gamification, and humor—. By incorporating these strategies in ESL contexts, teachers can promote autonomy and engagement, and strengthen motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Since students find themselves in a safe and positive psychological state, they are more receptive to external input and mitigate more easily the effects of anxiety, which often blocks engagement and learning.

3.1 Psychological strategies

Psychological strategies are pivotal in shaping students' emotional well-being, especially when students are learning something that they did not voluntarily choose, as it is in the case of ESL. The strategies teachers adopt in class can significantly impact —positively or negatively— learners' motivation, engagement, and overall academic outcomes, shaping the psychological climate of the classroom. Effective teachers are not only aware of students' performance but remain attuned to their attitudes, emotions, and social dynamics. Research shows, it is extremely important that teachers adapt themselves and the motivational strategies to each group and try to fit individual learners, since “a motivational strategy that works well in one cultural context may fail in another” (Dörnyei, 2001, p. 144).

Central to these psychological strategies is the teacher's ability to build strong relationships with students and positively react to peer interaction. When having a good relationship with others, students are more likely to feel that they are in a safe environment where teachers are their confidants and not their enemies. According to Eccles and Roeser (2009), a lack of supportive teacher-student relationships, or fostering competitive peer environments, can inadvertently hinder students' motivation, especially when the aim is to foster cooperation and inclusion.

Drawing from SDT (Ryan & Deci, 2000), teachers can foster sustained motivation by supporting the three basic psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. However, while the SDT underscores the importance of satisfying these three psychological needs for motivation, it is the Rhetorical/Relational Goal Theory (RRGT) (Mottet et al., 2006) that provides a lens through which to comprehend how communication between teacher and student directly eases this process. Mottet et al.

(2006) introduce a dual framework within the field of communication: rhetorical perspective and relational perspectives. The former refers to how teachers communicate to deliver information in an effective way, considering aspects such as persuasion, clarity, and organisation, while the latter perspective refers to how teachers build relationships through a warm, responsive, and immediate communication. Relational goals, in particular, are key aspects in fostering students' motivation, as they create a positive interpersonal climate.

Subtle refinements in teachers' attitudinal resources in the classroom can positively help these relational goals and enhance students' engagement. For instance, the use of verbal and non-verbal behaviours that approach learners' preoccupations and reduce psychological distance —such as smiling, recalling students by their names, and some physical postures such as leaning in while taking— can improve the teacher-student relationship. Additionally, by actively listening and validating students' thoughts and contributions, learners feel valued and increase their sense of relatedness, making them more participative and active in class.

Nevertheless, being an effective teacher is not only about implementing rhetorical or relational practices in isolation, but it is a matter of balancing both to maximise the results. With regard to instructional communication, which serves as a bridge between instructional techniques and the psychological climate of the learning environment, Hurt et al. (1978) emphasised that “[c]ommunication is the crucial link between a knowledgeable teacher and a learning student”, claiming that “the difference between knowing and teaching is communication in the classroom” (p.3).

Furthermore, relational communication can help overcome some of the main barriers faced by ESL adolescent students, namely language insecurity and language

anxiety (Horwitz et al., 1986). Adolescence is a developmental period in which students are notably sensitive to peer evaluation and self-consciousness, making them more vulnerable to communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991). As a result, their participation in class is hindered and their confidence lowered. However, the teachers' role in the classroom can make a difference. Reeve (2006) directly connects the autonomy-teaching method outcomes to SDT (Ryan & Deci, 2000), underscoring the achievement of the three psychological needs and providing students with a better emotional well-being and a stronger persistence and resilience in ESL. Autonomy-supportive teachers provide students with controlled liberty and succeed in creating a safe environment where students want to be. Unlike controlling teachers, autonomy-supportive teachers are characterised as able to listen to their students and offer them meaningful choices, they tend to avoid traditional and unattractive prescribed activities, and give students the options to decide on topics and materials (Reeve, 2006). Research has demonstrated that leadership styles can directly impact group performance and satisfaction (Lewin et al., 1939; Heron, 1999). For example, Lewin et al. (1939) explored how children in an American summer camp reacted to three different group leadership styles: i) autocratic leader, who has complete control over the group, ii) democratic, who involves students in decision-taking about their own functioning, and iii) laissez-faire, where very little leadership behaviour was performed. The findings indicated that the laissez-faire produced the least favourable outcomes due to psychological absence, while the democratic approach resulted in higher quality performance and friendlier communication than the autocratic style. The use of this strategy can help attract learners to the activities and engage them more easily. In addition, both Lewin (1939) and Heron (1999) defend adaptive leadership styles in

educational contexts—that means, teachers who adapt their teaching styles and shift from autocratic to democratic according to the situation— and give special importance to controlled and studied scaffolding rather than abandonment.

The use of non-controlling language is another key factor that can strengthen teacher's relationship with students. Through more indirect and collaborative communication teachers make students feel more engaged in the task and reduce any pressures that direct commands such as *you must*, or *you have to* can cause. Complementing non-controlling communication, autonomy-supportive teachers were found to highlight the importance of the activities by explaining their purpose and why they are valuable instead of merely asking for their completion. This way, students can understand why they are asked to accomplish the task and how this is relevant for their progress.

Positive and constructive feedback also plays a crucial role in autonomy-teaching. Specifically, feedback that focuses not only on grammar mistakes and language improvement but on growth, effort, and improvement, makes a difference in students' reaction to the message, their acceptance of it, and their effort to correct it. As claimed by Câmpean et al. (2024) “beyond mere acknowledgment of accomplishment, positive feedback is a deliberate and tactical form of praise that accentuates the specific abilities of each learner. This approach fosters a sense of accomplishment, builds confidence, and cultivates a favourable self-perception” (p. 2). Thus, autonomy-supportive positive feedback helps learning while reinforcing the students' sense of agency, self-esteem, and self-concept (Câmpean et al., 2024).

Teachers can also complement their assessment and evaluation of students incorporating self-evaluation tests, making students reflect on their own progress and

learning process. Teachers can promote academic self-regulation through engaging students in careful self-assessment, since it has been demonstrated that there is a strong connection between self-regulation and achievement (Andrade & Valtcheva, 2009). For example, researchers such as Andrade and Valtcheva state that “students who set goals, make flexible plans to meet them, and monitor their progress tend to learn more and do better in school than students who do not” (p. 13).

However, in order to achieve effective self-assessment, it is crucial to meet some conditions, such as understanding the importance of the self-evaluation, have direct instruction in and assistance with the evaluation—that is where teachers are particularly important—or have opportunities to revise and improve the task or performance. In other words, teachers are responsible for creating a learner-centred environment and promoting education through autonomy rather than in a strictly highly controlled environment. Self-assessment is a way of approaching students’ learning process and has a powerful effect not only on learning but also on controlling their own performances.

Overall, psychological strategies play a central role in shaping the climate of the ESL classroom, promoting emotional safety, motivation, and engagement. These strategies go beyond academic instruction, focusing on the use of rhetorical and relational approaches that help students feel comfortable and supported. In doing so, teachers become key agents of enriching and meaningful communication and trusted facilitators of learning, rather than merely authoritative figures. This positive classroom environment is significantly important for adolescent learners, since barriers such as anxiety and linguistic insecurity are reduced. As a result, students show more noticeable positive feelings, making the language learning process more accessible, enjoyable, and effective for all of them.

3.2 Instructional strategies

Instructional strategies are those pedagogical methods used by educators to facilitate both learning and teaching. To create a more attractive, engaging, and motivating classroom environment for high school students —and help fulfil both rhetorical and relational goals— teachers can incorporate a variety of techniques, such as group work, gamification, and technology-enhanced methods. These tools are not only engaging but are also key in enhancing learning outcomes and contributing to a supportive classroom climate where students feel supported and valued. To capture students' attention, it is vital that these strategies are appealing to them. The concept of *attraction*, which is defined by Dörnyei and Muir (2019) as the “initial instinctive appeal” (p. 721), is one of the components, along with acceptance, which characterises relationships among group members.

There are several methods to promote group cohesion and acceptance, such as learning about each other, close interactions, or shared group history (Dörnyei & Murphy, 2003). Building on this, one widely studied method for enhancing group cohesion is cooperative learning. Johnson and Johnson (2009) conducted a meta-analysis on the impact of this methodology, grounded in social interdependence theory. This theory is based on the idea that the way students structure their goals determines how they interact with one another and the outcomes they achieve. They argue that cooperative learning can lead to higher achievement and greater psychological health compared to other competitive or individualistic learning environments. In this analysis five essential elements for effectiveness in cooperative learning are underscored: i) positive interdependence, which promotes cohesiveness; ii) individual accountability, which values each student's performance; iii) promotive interaction, which encourages mutual

support; iv) social skills, which builds a strong teamwork; and v) group processing, which helps identify ways to improve their effectiveness in achieving goals. Their findings reveal that cooperative learning not only improves interpersonal relationships and social support but also fosters critical thinking and problem-solving skills.

Having a cohesive group is especially important to help students feel comfortable and forget their fears, such as exclusion, negative evaluation, and academic anxiety, which are singularly common among ESL learners. When students feel included and safe, they tend to participate and confront risk-taking more often, which is an essential component of language learning. In this context, the concept of *tolerance* is crucial to avoid embarrassment and accept mistakes, and classrooms should become a place where linguistic mistakes are not judged but accepted and corrected. This shift in perspective anxiety can be notably reduced as language errors are naturalised.

To actively support this sense of inclusion and cohesion, teachers need to be aware of the natural roles that students and groups adopt in class. Roles such as leader, organiser, initiator, energiser, and information-seeker, among others, often appear spontaneously. Teachers, however, should play an active part in encouraging students to explore and rotate roles through targeted activities. This distribution of roles can maintain balanced participation and can help avoid interpersonal conflicts and contribute to a more harmonious classroom (Dörnyei & Muir, 2019). For instance, Mork (2020) analysed role rotation and how this could enhance participation in ESL classrooms. He implemented structured role assignments within group discussions where students adopted roles such as leader, moderator, timekeeper, recorder/reporter, and language monitor, and shifted them regularly. The study revealed that by assigning and rotating roles students' confidence in using a second or foreign language was enhanced during discussions,

promoting equitable contributions among group members and increased engagement and participation.

Beyond group work, gamification and humour further support classroom engagement by stimulating enjoyment, curiosity, and interaction. Despite occasional criticism for deviating from the traditional instructional approaches, recent research highlights that gamification elements have indeed gained a significant importance in the field of language education (Chan & Lo, 2024). Chan and Lo (2024) argue that gamification can be helpful in improving language skills and linguistic competencies, including vocabulary acquisition, grammar, reading, listening, and pronunciation. Gamification is the “*use of game design elements in non-game contexts*” (Deterding et al., 2011, p.10). This method, in particular, has been consistently associated with increased intrinsic motivation due to the students’ natural desire to engage in games, play, and challenge themselves. However, it can also be useful to increase and favour extrinsic motivation through the implementation of diverse variations in games that may not initially seem appealing. For instance, adding elements such as points, badges, and leaderboards into a standard textbook activity can change the dynamic of the class and foster competition and participation (Xu et al., 2021). By using these mechanisms, students feel more attracted to the activity while at the same time they learn and put into practice their knowledge, creating a sense of accomplishment and progress where students feel more invested in the learning process.

Importantly, the effectiveness of gamification and humour depends on the teacher’s competence to balance interactional activities with the respective goals of the lesson. To maximise the advantages of technology-based language teaching (TBLT) tasks, teachers need to ensure that gamified activities align with the students’ learning

goals, and that there are balanced competitive and collaborative elements in order to avoid interpersonal tensions. Through these implementations learners can engage more easily in the tasks proposed without feeling pressure, fear of failure, or embarrassment. In this context, humour plays a complementary role by reducing affective filters —such as anxiety— thereby enhancing students’ willingness to communicate and actively taking part in class (Horowitz et al., 1986). Thus, by reducing stress through these gamified activities where humorous elements are present, students’ intrinsic and extrinsic motivation are enhanced, leading to a greater engagement and sustained effort in language learning tasks.

Providing further evidence for the use of gamification, technology-enhanced tasks have been shown to positively impact classroom settings by applying dynamic and interactive technological resources into traditional ESL instruction. Technology-enhanced tasks in ESL instruction comes from Chong and Reinders’s (2020) meta-analysis on TBLT. Grounded Theory (GT), which is a methodology used to synthesise the findings of 16 qualitative studies, was used to examine i) the characteristics of technology-mediated tasks in the primary studies, ii) the affordances and limitations, and iii) the emergent themes resulting from the GT analysis. The results demonstrated that tasks were characterised by authenticity, usefulness, difficulty, and sequence, but most importantly by scaffolding. These findings place teachers in a second place, but still they are present to support students when necessary. Although some limitations were noted — for example, unclear goals or technical concerns— technology-mediated tasks have numerous advantages, including facilitating collaboration, promoting student-centred learning, and the development of both linguistic and non-linguistic skills, which is significantly positive in the SLA process. In relation to the emerging themes resulting

from the GT analysis, effectiveness was shown to be dependent on five factors, encompassing learners' experiences and familiarity with task-mediated tasks and their requirements, peer engagements, and the balance between learner autonomy and teacher guidance. When these aspects are well aligned, there is an increase in the use of the target language as a result of lowered anxiety and significantly increased motivation.

In ESL classrooms, strategies such as group work, gamification, and technology-enhanced methodologies are not simply instructional tools; they have the ability to reshape students' perceptions of the language itself. These methods are particularly beneficial because they transform students' beliefs about English language classes from merely a compulsory and evaluative subject to a more engaging, meaningful, and enjoyable learning experience. By incorporating rating collaborative, interactive, autonomous, and enjoyable techniques, teachers foster a more positive classroom climate in the ESL that reduces boredom and increases students' attention. These are key strategies in fostering both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation and in encouraging students to participate more actively in class, take linguistics risks, and redefine their attitude toward acquiring English as an L2.

4. Conclusion

This final degree project has examined the numerous factors that influence adolescents' motivation, focusing primarily on SLA contexts, and underscoring supportive environments and the teachers' role in fostering language learning academic motivation in ESL settings. Drawing from a wide range of theoretical perspectives, including the Socio-Educational Model (Gardner, 1985), Self-Determination Theory (Ryan and Deci, 2000), and L2 Motivational Self System (Dörnyei, 2001), this study has emphasised that

adolescents' academic motivation is a dynamic reaction to social, emotional, and contextual factors, rather than a fixed trait.

Adolescent learners, who are under constant emotional and psychological development, are particularly sensitive to their educational environments. As demonstrated throughout this project, motivation is either nurtured or hindered by factors such as classroom layout, teacher behaviour, and peer dynamics. Depending on these conditions, students' intrinsic and extrinsic motivation either increase or decline, notably affecting their engagement and success in the learning process.

In order to ensure students' sustained engagement and foster a positive attitude toward the learning process, it is crucial to fulfill the three psychological needs highlighted in SDT: autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2000). When these needs are satisfied, students are more likely to enjoy and take part in the language learning. However, to achieve this, classrooms and teachers have to overcome the main barriers that often block ESL students, such as anxiety, linguistic insecurity and repetitive and monotonous tasks. To do so, students need to be situated in physical environments where they feel comfortable and safe, highlighting not only individual growth, but also where they can cooperate and collaborate with individuals that are undergoing the same challenges; their peers (Krashen, 1982).

Teachers, on the other hand, are key agents not only for content delivery, but also as facilitators of students' psychological well-being and motivational engagement, which reduces linguistic barriers and fosters participation. This project has identified two main categories of teacher strategies that are especially important to support motivation: psychological and instructional.

Psychological strategies are those which focus on the students' well-being and comfort in the classroom, including methods such as autonomy-supportive teaching, self-evaluation tests, and the reinforcement of positive feedback (Mottet et al., 2006). Instructional strategies involve the design and teaching of attractive, engaging, and relevant learning activities, challenging students and fostering both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. These methods are based on the incorporation of group work, gamification, and technology-enhanced methodologies in simplistic activities.

In conclusion, motivating adolescent learners in ESL contexts requires a combination of emotional support, instructional flexibility, and classroom management. As noted by Dörnyei (2001) not all strategies work equally for every student or group; therefore, teachers must be aware of the individual differences and adapt activities according to both the learning objectives, and the learners themselves. However, motivation and adolescence are two complex concepts that are influenced by a wide range of factors that may interfere with the learning process, and not all teachers may receive adequate training to face the psychological struggles that block adolescents progress in SLA. Thus, in order to understand how teachers can be more prepared for future ESL learners, further research is necessary.

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