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Exploring Factors Influencing Low-Achieving EFL High School Students' Motivation in Learning English from Self-Determination Perspectives

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Abstract: Motivation is one of the most critical prerequisites contributing to English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students' academic success. Nonetheless, the connection between students' motivation and academic low achievement remains underexplored in Vietnam. This study, therefore, drawing from Deci and Ryan's Self-determination Theory, endeavored to bridge this gap by exploring factors affecting low-achieving high school EFL students' motivation in learning English, which in turn shaped their academic outcomes. The study adopted a cross-sectional qualitative case study design and conducted semi-structured interviews with four purposefully selected participants. Qualitative data were analyzed via convergent cross-case thematic analysis. Findings revealed that participants' motivation in learning English was dramatically affected by external and internal factors. External factors included institution-related, family-related, teacher-related, peer-related, and socioculture-related influences. Internal factors encompassed intrinsic motivation in learning English, personal interests in learning English, and self-regulated learning competence. Critically, external factors were perceived to be more influential on their motivation in learning English than internal factors. Subsequently, some pedagogical implications were introduced to relevant stakeholders to enhance teaching practices and foster English learning motivation among this student population.

Keywords: *Influencing factors, motivation in learning English, low-achieving students, self-determination theory.*

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Introduction

English is recognized as a critical medium for exchanging information and fostering human interaction (Phan et al., 2025). Importantly, learning this language is a prerequisite for those who wish to sustain themselves in the ever-changing context of internationalization (Ekiz & Kulmetov, 2016; Gardner & Lambert, 1959). A vast body of literature has investigated numerous factors affecting the process of English language learning (Ali & Pathan, 2017). Among these factors, motivation stands out as a key determinant in the success of acquiring a second and foreign language (Amoah & Yeboah, 2021). In broader terms, motivation emerges as a key psychological driver shaping the extent to which students invest effort, persist through challenges, and develop long-term engagement with language learning. Among English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students, low-achieving ones are particularly vulnerable to diminished motivation due to a confluence of contextual disadvantages (Boo et al., 2015; Phuong, 2022). Despite its critical significance, learning motivation among this specific student population remains insufficiently addressed in the current literature.

In Vietnamese settings, the "Đổi mới" (Renovation) policy in 1986 brought about substantial alterations in the field of English language education (Bui & Nguyen, 2016). From the late 20th to the early 21st century, the push for international integration became more urgent, particularly following Vietnam's official membership in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations in 1997 and the World Trade Organization in 2007. In 2008, the Vietnamese Government issued Decision No. 1400/QĐ-TTg to launch the "National Foreign Language Project 2020" (NFLP 2020). These top-down initiatives signified the Government's great commitment to elevating the standards of English teaching and learning across the whole country. However, despite these policy-driven efforts, English learning outcomes, particularly among students in socioeconomically modest regions, remain below expectations. Among various elements contributing to these learning outcomes, student motivation constitutes a central factor warranting deeper investigation. Whereas a substantial body of Vietnamese studies has examined the interconnection between motivation

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and academic achievement among EFL students, these studies employed different methods (e.g., quantitative or mixed-methods ones) and focused on general student populations. As a result, a qualitative study on contextual influences on low-achieving students' motivation is much-needed. Furthermore, few studies in the local context have grounded their investigations in Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985), a robust framework for deeply understanding the psychological needs that underlie motivation in social sciences. Addressing these gaps, this study adopts a qualitative research design to explore the factors influencing English learning motivation among low-achieving high school EFL students in a rural area of the Mekong Delta region. By focusing on a neglected student group and foregrounding sociocultural contexts in which their motivation is situated, the study endeavors to provide a more comprehensive understanding of how external and internal factors affect students' motivation in learning English. In doing so, it contributes theoretically to the current literature on language learning motivation in under-resourced settings.

Literature Review

Motivation in Learning English

Motivation can be regarded as one of the most critical contributors to people's success. Gardner and Lambert (1959) defined motivation as people's intention to be involved with particular socio-cultural groups and acquire their specific cultures. Expanding upon this idea, Dörnyei (2001) characterized motivation as complex, dynamic, and even energizing motives toward life orientation and self-determination. From these conceptualizations, motivation can be synthesized as the underlying force guiding people's individual, social, and professional practices. Academically, motivation is a critical element in language education. In the field of teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL), such motivation is linked to students' personal motives and enjoyment in participating in learning activities. This concept encapsulates the significance of students' willingness to immerse themselves in learning, emphasizing that motivation serves as a cornerstone in navigating the complexities of acquiring a second or foreign language. Dörnyei and Ushioda (2021) suggested that motivation is intertwined with students' learning engagement and directly shapes how they learn and achieve academic goals. In this study, motivation is contextually conceptualized as Vietnamese low-achieving high school EFL students' motives in learning English in order to enhance their academic performances and outcomes. Contextually, such a motivation is greatly affected by different ecological influences.

Related Studies on Factors Affecting EFL Students' Motivation in Learning English

There has been much research conducted to understand factors affecting EFL students' motivation in learning English internationally. Ekiz and Kulmetov (2016) investigated factors affecting EFL students' motivation in learning English in relation to parental support, environmental influences, and teacher attitudes with 40 EFL first-grade students. Notably, participants were more motivated as their parents actively encouraged their English acquisition process. Reinforcing beliefs and collaborative work with peers enhanced their motivation. However, the study acknowledged limitations related to external socio-cultural influences. Wallace and Leong (2020) explored students' perceptions of stakeholders' support and the formal learning environment influencing their motivation. Findings revealed that students were highly motivated to learn English for instrumental and integrative reasons, students viewed their teachers positively, and games with songs ignited intrinsic motivation. Subsequently, Mahdi et al. (2024) employed a model to examine how campus-related, family-related, and community-related factors influenced participants' self-perception and motivation. Findings mentioned that each of these factors exerted a great positive impact on participants' motivation in learning English.

Within Vietnamese contexts, Pham's (2016) aim was to shed light on sociocultural influences on Vietnamese high school students' motivation in learning English in a rural area. Findings revealed that participants' motivation was shaped by their parental encouragement, financial investment, peer effects, and perceived values of language learning. Dang et al. (2021) tried to comprehend factors influencing the motivation in learning English of EFL freshmen at a university. The study involved 84 participants who completed questionnaires, and interviews were conducted to gather qualitative information. Findings identified parental, environmental, teachers, and intrinsic factors motivating them to learn English. Nguyen (2022) investigated factors affecting motivation related to the socio-psychological orientations of 74 non-English-majored students. The findings indicated that participants expressed positive attitudes towards physical facilities, teaching methods, teachers themselves, and learning achievements influenced their motivation to enroll in English courses.

Across international and Vietnamese settings, a consistent body of research has emphasized the role of multiple factors in shaping EFL students' motivation in learning the language. While this convergence is valuable, notable contrasts emerge in terms of research focus and analytical scope. International studies (e.g., Ekiz & Kulmetov, 2016; Mahdi et al., 2024; Wallace & Leong, 2020) adopted broader ecological or socio-psychosocial perspectives, integrating individual and systemic dimensions of learning motivation. These studies further offered complex understandings of how contextual variables, self-perceptions, and stakeholder support interact to influence students' motivation. In contrast, Vietnamese studies (e.g., Pham, 2016; Dang et al., 2021; Nguyen, 2022) collectively centered on specific educational settings or demographic groups, with a critical emphasis on institutional factors and general student populations. However, despite these contributions, a critical knowledge gap persists. Most existing Vietnamese studies have not

explicitly examined low-achieving students, particularly those in socioeconomically disadvantaged areas. By focusing largely on average or high-achieving students, previous research has overlooked the lived realities of a marginalized yet significant subgroup. Addressing such a gap is believed to be crucial for developing a more inclusive and contextually responsive understanding of English language learning motivation in Vietnam, especially in light of possible imbalances between urban and rural areas in the Mekong Delta region.

Characteristics of Low-Achieving Students

In the field of TEFL, understanding the characteristics of low-achieving students is crucial for critical pedagogical interventions. Students are identified as low-achieving based on some fundamental criteria. Firstly, low-achieving students are those who have limited ability and competencies in the educational process and perform below the expected levels of proficiency in academic subjects (Chen, 2024). Secondly, they face individual academic adversities in comprehension, concentration, and metacognitive abilities, and tend to be easily confused by classroom-related distractors (Ma et al., 2024). Thirdly, they may lack personal motivation, interests, and engagement in learning (Andika, 2024; Steinmayr et al., 2019). Therefore, they potentially have negative self-concepts and low self-esteem in their competencies to perform academically. Lastly, in Vietnamese EFL contexts, particularly in the context of high schools, students are also categorized as low-achieving by their Grade Point Average (GPA). Those whose GPA is under 6.5 are grouped into low-achievers and classified as “Trung bình” (Average).

The Theoretical Framework: The Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985)

This study adopted Self-Determination Theory (SDT) (Deci & Ryan, 1985) as its guiding theoretical framework to explain internal and external factors influencing learning motivation. According to SDT, motivation is conceptualized as the energy, direction, and persistence of human behavior, which varies in quality depending on the degree to which it is autonomous or controlled. At its core, the theory posits that motivation is shaped by the fulfillment of three innate psychological needs (autonomy, competence, and relatedness). Autonomy involves the sense of volition and control over one's learning; competence refers to the belief in one's ability to succeed and develop through appropriate challenge and feedback; and relatedness pertains to feeling connected and supported by others in the learning environment. In each of these needs, Deci and Ryan (1985) described the intrinsic and extrinsic motivations which drive people's development. Intrinsic motivation is mentioned as people's desire to partake in social activities because of their personal enjoyment. This type of motivation includes three categories (knowledge, accomplishment, and stimulation). In contrast, extrinsic motivation is conceptualized as external forces for people to participate in social activities. This argues that they are driven to pursue a goal not necessarily because they mainly perceive some forms of external benefits and subsequent consequences tied to their participation. The SDT, thus, proposes that people are able to transition from being extrinsically to intrinsically motivated through an internalization process (Deci & Ryan, 1985), progressing in three stages, including introjection, identification, and integration.

This theory was believed to be well-suited for understanding the motivational dynamics of low-achieving EFL high school students in the Mekong Delta region. In alignment with this study's focus, the SDT further enabled a critical examination of both internal and external influences which collectively shaped the quality of motivation experienced by these students. To achieve its aim, this study tried to answer the following question: What factors influence Vietnamese low-achieving high school EFL students' motivation in learning English?

Methodology

Research Design

A case study design from qualitative research methodology was employed in this study based on the students' low achievement as an unusual phenomenon investigated deeply in its real context (Creswell, 2014). A case study is characterized as a detailed and systematic examination of a single individual, group, community, or other unit in which researchers analyze in-depth qualitative data across multiple cases. As Yin (2003, p. 13) asserted, a case study is defined as “an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident”. This research approach was perceived to be best suited for examining the factors affecting Vietnamese low-achieving high school EFL students' motivation in learning English.

Research Context and Participants

This study took place at a high school in a developing ward of a rural province in the Mekong Delta region, Vietnam. The participants were four eleventh-grade students (Male = 2; Female = 2). They had formally been studying English as a foreign language for at least five years since grade six. They were selected based on specific criteria established in the literature review regarding the characteristics of low-achieving students. Additionally, their GPA in English was under 6.5 scored in the first semester of the academic year of 2023 - 2024. The following table introduces demographic-related information of these participants.

Table 1. Participants' Demographic Information

Participant	Age	Gender	Years of learning English	Latest GPA in English
1	17	Male	5	6.2
2	18	Female	6	6.0
3	17	Male	5	6.4
4	17	Female	5	6.4

Data Collection Instrument and Research Procedure

This qualitative case study utilized semi-structured interviews as the main instrument for data collection. There were two rationales for choosing this interview type to collect data. Firstly, this interview type boosts conversational aspects and promotes ease and adaptability for interviewers and interviewees (Gillham, 2005). Secondly, this interview type facilitates natural discussions and allows interviewees to share their lived experiences and reflections on these experiences (Fraenkel et al., 2012).

The research procedure systematically spanned five weeks. In the first week, the research aim was clearly communicated to participants in an initial meeting held in a quiet room at their school's English Department. Ethical considerations were thoroughly addressed during this meeting, and a purposeful sample of four low-achieving EFL students was carefully selected based on their recent academic records and teachers' recommendations. Following this, a semi-structured interview protocol (see Appendix) with probing questions was meticulously crafted and revised, incorporating open-ended questions designed to facilitate an in-depth exploration of participants' self-perceptions of factors influencing their motivation in learning English. Before the interviews were conducted, participants were explicitly assured that their identities would remain confidential and that all data collected would be used solely for research purposes. Each participant was then asked to indicate their voluntary participation by signing a written informed consent form. In the second and third weeks, semi-structured interviews were conducted individually with each participant in a quiet, familiar room provided by the school to ensure comfort and minimize external distractions. Each interview lasted approximately 45 to 60 minutes, and was audio-recorded with the participants' permission to ensure accuracy during transcription and analysis. The interviews were conducted in Vietnamese to ensure that participants could express their thoughts comfortably. During the fourth week, the audio recordings were transcribed verbatim in Vietnamese and then translated into English for analysis by the researcher. To enhance the credibility and accuracy of the data, member checking was employed. The translated interview transcripts were cross-checked by two English translators and returned to four participants for their review, clarification, and subsequent modifications. Minor revisions were made based on their input to ensure that their meanings were faithfully represented. In the fifth week, the finalized transcripts were systematically analyzed to identify recurring themes and insights related to the research question.

As for the data analysis technique, cross-case thematic analysis (Guest et al., 2012) was employed to analyze the qualitative data collected. The process entailed seven recursive stages: transcribing, familiarization, coding, generating initial themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the analytical report. All interview records were carefully transcribed to ensure semantic accuracy and cultural sensitivity. The transcripts were thoroughly reviewed to identify underlying patterns and recurring ideas. Subsequently, relevant phrases, sentences, or sections were coded and grouped into preliminary themes, which were iteratively refined and merged when appropriate. Themes were then reviewed for internal coherence and relevance to the research questions, followed by clear definitions and labeling. To enhance the trustworthiness of the analysis, investigator triangulation was employed by involving a second coder to cross-check a portion of the data. Additionally, peer debriefing sessions were conducted throughout the analytic process to challenge emerging interpretations and minimize researcher bias. Finally, findings were synthesized and written up in a cross-case format, supported by representative participant quotations.

Results

This section reports research findings regarding factors affecting participants' motivation in learning English. Findings from interviews analyzed through cross-case thematic analysis were categorized into two themes consisting of external factors and internal factors (see Figure 1). In each theme, there were emergent sub-themes, each of which was supported with direct quotes.

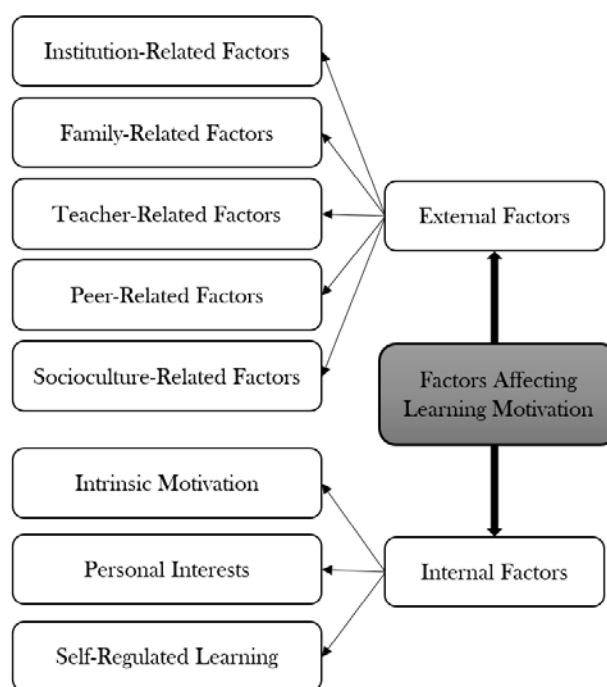


Figure 1. Factors Affecting Participants' Motivation in Learning English

External Factors

Institution-Related Factors

In the context of teachers integrating technology into classrooms, although this endeavor could aid participants with quick information access, there existed a risk of their distraction. They perceived that when their peers used phones for non-academic purposes, it caused a source of distraction. Moreover, the lack of specific guidance on how to use the devices in class led to their disruptions in learning, making it difficult for them to maintain concentration and learn English in the most effective manner. One participant mentioned,

"Allowing smartphones in class is useful for searching for information quickly, but honestly speaking, when my classmates use them for stuff that is not related to learning, it really distracts me. There are no clear rules on how to use them correctly, so it ends up breaking the flow of the lesson. It often pulls my attention away and makes it tough to stay on track because phones keep interrupting." (Participant 1)

In addition to information technology integration into the class, extracurricular activities, though intended to be motivating, sometimes brought about excessive competitive pressure to achieve higher results, which in turn overshadowed their enjoyment of English learning. Accordingly, some participants perceived a competitive learning environment that was not adequately supported, as it made them feel overwhelmed to participate in these activities. One participant voiced her thought,

"I thought English clubs and debates would make learning more fun and improve my bad English proficiency, but sometimes it gets too intense. The pressures to do well kill the joy of actual learning, so I end up feeling less excited and disappointed. Without proper support, the whole competitive vibe can sometimes freak me out and make me not want to join in anymore. It drags down my motivation in learning English." (Participant 2)

Family-Related Factors

Families had a great influence on participants' motivation to learn English. Investment in technological facilities alongside familial encouragement contributed to increasing a sense of enthusiasm for learning English. Though they were scolded due to academic low-achievement, it made participants feel overwhelmingly discouraged. However, in the long run, they saw it as a motivation to improve themselves further and strive for better academic performances. Two participants reflected on their retrospective experiences,

"My family bought me a PC, so I can easily look up English vocabulary, and they always encourage me to review lessons and fix mistakes. If I am not doing well, they just comfort me and tell me to try harder without any scolding. It really pushes me to invest more time and effort in learning English." (Participant 1)

"When I get yelled at or scolded because of my poor performance in English at school, it really sucks and I feel totally discouraged at first. But after a bit, I kind of see it as motivation to get better. I know that tough love is part of the process, and it eventually helps me improve further." (Participant 2)

Teacher-Related Factors

Teachers themselves had positive and negative impacts on participants' motivation in learning English. Participants were eager to learn this subject, but their teachers' personal and professional traits could motivate and hinder their efforts. A passionate teacher and interesting teaching methodologies contributed to a positive learning environment which encouraged participants to try harder and vice versa. Participants mentioned,

"I really want to learn English, and when my teacher uses fun methods and gives clear instructions, I feel hopeful and want to push myself. But when the teacher is too strict or boring, despite my desire to improve, I quickly lose focus and feel so discouraged. It's frustrating because I know I have the drive, but the teaching style can make or even break my motivation dramatically." (Participant 3)

"I am trying so hard to concentrate and absorb what's being taught, but if the class turns into a noisy mess because the teacher can't keep order, I struggle to keep up with the class. On the other hand, when the teacher manages the class well and keeps things engaging, it fires me up even more, even though I sometimes feel like I am falling behind. A good classroom setup can make all the difference in keeping my spirit alive." (Participant 4)

Peer-Related Factors

Classmates were considered a source of both encouragement and pressure to participants. The constructive companionship from peers helped them feel less alone in the English learning process, easily exchanged ideas, and overcame academic adversities. However, when they felt left behind and had no friends to study with, they easily fell into a state of loneliness and even demotivation. Some participants expressed,

"When I have close friends studying English with me, I feel way more motivated. It is much easier to ask questions and learn together. If I am on my own without any supportive friends, I feel kind of stuck, and that really affects my drive negatively." (Participant 1)

"Seeing friends get higher scores than I can go two ways: it either pushes me to work harder or makes me feel under pressure. Sometimes, watching someone ace an exam like IELTS fires me up to try more. It also creates self-doubt that can dampen my enthusiasm. Balancing that competition with supportive interactions is key for me." (Participant 3)

Socioculture-Related Factors

Socio-cultural contributors provided both opportunities and challenges for the participants in learning English. The awareness of the importance of English in a globalized society created a strong motivation for them to improve their proficiency. Living in rural areas with few opportunities to practice English formally contributed to their feeling isolated, slow in learning, and even discouraged. Two participants shared,

"Living in a modernizing society where foreigners might show up anytime makes me realize how crucial English is. If I cannot speak it, I worry about struggling to communicate. It pushes me to learn more. This awareness is a strong motivator, but at the same time, the pressure of needing to fit in can feel extremely overwhelming." (Participant 3)

"In my area, not many people speak English, so opportunities to use it are very rare. Knowing that every subject in college needs English and that being good at it gives me a future advantage keeps me motivated. However, the lack of daily practice and role models can sometimes make learning feel isolated and slow down my progress." (Participant 4)

Internal Factors

Intrinsic Motivation in Learning English

Despite their personal awareness of the importance of learning English, participants lacked intrinsic motivation to overcome academic adversities. They relied on recognition from teachers, family and friends rather than motivation coming from themselves. Difficulties in grasping knowledge reduced their motivation as they did not receive timely rewards from their surrounding environment. Participants stated,

"I know that learning English is important for a good future, but I often feel tired and discouraged when I encounter difficulties with grammar or vocabulary. I study mainly to receive compliments or rewards from teachers and family. If they do not encourage me, sometimes I feel forced to learn this language." (Participant 2)

"Although I want to get good grades and be recognized, when the results are not as expected, I easily lose motivation. The lack of joy in learning and relying only on praise from others makes it impossible for me to maintain long-term

efforts. One more thing is that when I do not intend to go to university, and my future career is unrelated to English.” (Participant 4)

Personal Interests in Learning English

Initially, participants did not have a personal interest in English because they felt that the language was not relevant to their daily lives and future job orientation. A positive environment did not always create curiosity, but only partly reduce boredom in learning English. They lacked a passion and personal connection with the language, leading to learning being more of a compulsion. Some participants expressed as follows,

“To be honest, I do not really love English. At first, I only studied to achieve the required academic goals, not because I myself felt so interested. When I encountered difficult topics, I often quickly felt discouraged and lost my curiosity to explore English further. Moreover, this language, you know, is very different from Vietnamese, so I think it is very difficult for a low-achieving student like me to master it.” (Participant 3)

“Although the friendly learning environment helped reduce stress in learning English, I think the lack of my personal preferences prevents me from developing a passion for English. I learned passively, just following instructions without any real connection or excitement for the language.” (Participant 2)

Self-Regulated Learning Competence

Participants had difficulties identifying learning goals, planning, and controlling their own learning process. This shortage of self-control made them feel stuck since they encountered learning obstacles. They did not know how to create effective learning strategies to improve their English language proficiency. Some mentioned,

“When learning English, I often do not know where to start when I encounter difficulties. I lack a clear study plan and am not confident in self-regulating my learning methods, leading to a feeling of impasse and giving up easily.” (Participant 1)

“I realize that I have shortcomings such as poor vocabulary and weak grammar, but due to lack of self-adjusting skills, I do not know how to make a specific plan to overcome them. When I do not see my progress in learning English, I do lose my confidence and feel unable to control myself in learning.” (Participant 3)

External and Internal Factors: Which Are More Influential?

Comparing external factors with internal factors, participants revealed that their external factors provided more immediate and powerful motivation. These influences played a decisive role in shaping their engagement and perseverance in learning English. Academic assistance from contextual influences facilitated them to overcome academic adversities and maintain progress. Two participants compared the two,

“I have tried to push myself based solely on my own willpower, but I have learned that clear guidance from my teacher and constant encouragement from my family fuel my motivation much more than any internal drive. Their support not only makes learning English more enjoyable but also gives me the confidence to tackle difficult topics, which would be nearly impossible relying on myself alone.” (Participant 3)

“No matter how much I genuinely want to improve, I can see that it is the external support which truly drives my progress. When I face challenges, it is the positive feedback from teachers and the resources my family provides that keep me going, proving that external influences are far more powerful than my personal interest in sustaining my motivation to learn English for the future.” (Participant 4)

Discussion

The study examined factors influencing the motivation in learning English of four Vietnamese low-achieving high school EFL students in a rural area in the Mekong Delta region. These factors were categorized into two themes: external factors and internal factors. Compared and contrasted within the SDT, these factors indicated that participants’ three psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness were not fully met. In the internalization process, their motivation in learning English as a foreign language stopped at the introjected stage (see Figure 2). This indicated that these participants learned English because they could predict beneficial academic and personal consequences tied to their learning and not because they were intrinsically motivated by individual preferences and efforts. Accordingly, the partial satisfaction of their basic psychological needs, largely reliant on the external forces, may have been one of the most important factors which contributed to their low academic achievement in English learning.

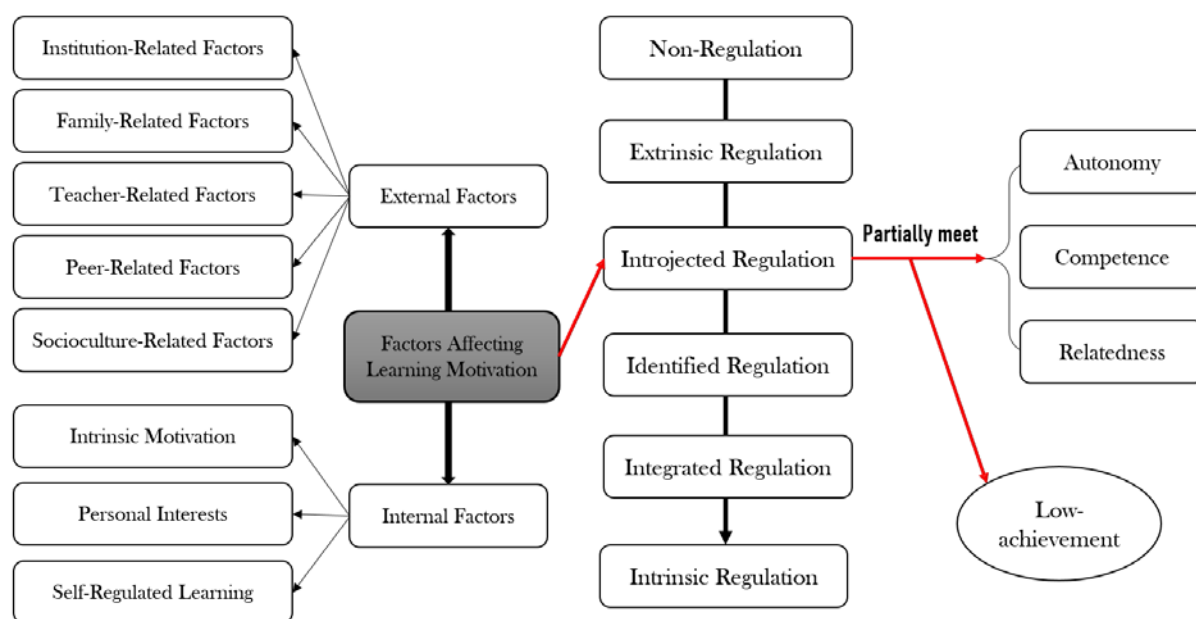


Figure 2. Research Findings Situated within the SDT

First and foremost, the extrinsic factors are critical in shaping participants' motivation in learning English. Firstly, the institution-related factors were considered the foundation in promoting learning motivation through providing the diverse opportunities to practice English. Such opportunities helped participants feel in control and shape the way they learned. It satisfied their autonomy as they were free to participate in English-practicing activities that suited their personal interests and current language proficiency. This finding was consistent with that of Wallace and Leong (2020) and Nguyen (2022). However, the current study extended in the way that if these activities were not practical, they could probably result in demotivation, especially among low-achieving students. Secondly, the familial assistance served to promote participants' motivation to learn English. Parents both provided financial support and encouraged participants to learn English, fulfilling the need for relatedness. While this is similar to the findings of Ekiz and Kulmetov (2016), Dang et al. (2021), and Pham (2016), the current study showed that if parental support focused only on expectations or achievement pressure without helping participants build intrinsic motivation, the need for autonomy was reduced. Thirdly, the teacher-related factors were highly appreciated in influencing participants' motivation to learn English. Teachers who created positive learning environments, provided constructive feedback, and encouraged creativity helped to satisfy competence and relatedness needs. This study added to the findings of Nguyen (2022) and Wallace and Leong (2020), who found that teachers are central contributors to participants' promoted learning motivation. Fourthly, peer interaction was another important external factor in promoting English learning motivation. Collaborative learning environments where participants shared experiences and successes with their peers helped to build a sense of relatedness. This result is also consistent with Dang et al. (2021) and Pham (2016), and further indicates that negative peer pressure could reduce learning motivation. Finally, socio-cultural factors played an important role in shaping learning motivation. Participants perceived English as the key to success in a globalized context. This drives the need for competence as they strove to improve their competencies to meet societal standards. This finding also aligns well with that of Nguyen, and Ekiz and Kulmetov. They emphasized that sociocultural factors both motivated participants and shaped their future professional goals. However, this study expanded previous knowledge by arguing that if social expectations were too unrealistic, students could experience more stress, reducing the sense of autonomy, and resulting in peer pressure.

Alongside the external factors, some internal factors, such as intrinsic motivation, personal interests, and self-regulated English learning competence, emerged as some critical contributors influencing participants' motivation in learning English. Firstly, although they were well aware of the importance of English in the context of globalization, they lacked the intrinsic motivation to overcome difficulties in learning. Participants often relied on recognition from teachers, family, or friends instead of finding true values and meaning in the learning process itself. This reflected a lack of autonomy as they did not feel that they were learning English for personal purposes, but because of external expectations and high-level pressures. Compared to Dang et al.'s (2021) and Ma et al.'s (2024) findings, external support was found to be the main motivator for participants, but the current study further clarified that over-reliance on extrinsic motivations could undermine the ability to develop intrinsic motivation. Secondly, a lack of personal interest in learning English was one of the main factors affecting their motivation in learning English. They believed that English was not relevant to their daily lives or career trajectories. This led to learning being just a mandatory task, not a meaningful professional experience. The absence of a personal connection with the language indicated an unmet need for relatedness when participants did not feel a relevance or emotional connection to learning English. Pham's

(2016) study also reflected a similar reality that the lack of interest in English stemmed from a feeling of impracticality and unneccessity. Moreover, whereas Mahdi et al. (2024) emphasized the role of a positive learning environment in reducing academic stress, the current study showed that a positive learning environment helped reduce pressure but was not enough to stimulate intrinsic motivation if participants did not develop autonomy in learning. Lastly, one of the biggest barriers to learning motivation was poor self-regulation in learning English. Participants had difficulty in identifying their academic goals, planning, and controlling the whole learning process. This significantly reduced the sense of control and ability to achieve goals. Aligning with Mahdi et al. (2024), the current study further showcased that as self-regulation learning skills were insufficient, participants were likely to fall into a deadlock and lose self-efficacy in their capacities to learn English independently.

Most significantly, participants remarked that external factors outweighed internal factors in shaping their motivation. This finding is in line with that of Ekiz and Kulmetov (2016) and Nguyen (2022) who emphasized the significance of contextual influences on participants' motivation in learning English. Whereas intrinsic motivation was key for long-term academic success, this study revealed that external forces were more essential, particularly for low-achieving students. Although consistent patterns were observed among participants, some contradictory findings emerged, reflecting the dynamic nature of learning motivation. While most participants depended heavily on external assistance, a few showcased signs of intrinsic motivation through self-initiated learning behaviors. These students, despite being categorized as low-achieving, demonstrated that personal interests and autonomy can still develop when students find meaningful connections with the language. This variation challenges the assumption that low-achieving students are uniformly extrinsically driven. Furthermore, although teacher and institutional support was generally appreciated, some participants found such support overly rigid or result-oriented, which inadvertently created pressure rather than motivation. In this local context, where academic success is commonly associated with external validation and social expectations, these findings highlighted a cultural tension between collective achievement and personal development. It suggested that when motivation is shaped mainly by fear of failure, participants might have struggled to develop a sense of ownership over their learning. These insights underlined the values of culturally responsive and learner-centered approaches that balance external encouragement with the cultivation of internal drive.

Conclusion

Given the centrality of motivation to EFL students' academic performance, this study substantially offers fresher insights into how contextual influences affect learning motivation of low-achieving students in a rural Vietnamese context. The findings thereby highlight the simultaneous influence of external forces (e.g., institution context, family involvement, peer relationships, and broader sociocultural norms) and students' internal drives (e.g., intrinsic motivation, personal interests, and self-regulated learning competence). Situated the findings in the SDT, the analysis further reveals that participants' psychological needs were only partially met, limiting their motivation to less autonomous forms of regulation. These nuanced interactions further serve to explain the persistence of low achievement despite ongoing engagement in English language learning.

Recommendations

This study proposes several pedagogical implications for key stakeholders with a central recommendation of a supportive learning environment aimed at enhancing low-achieving students' motivation to learn English. Specifically, EFL teachers should design contextually relevant and learner-centered lessons that incorporate students' interests and lived experiences. Practical strategies include allowing students to make choices in tasks to support autonomy, providing graduated challenges with constructive feedback to foster competence, and promoting collaborative learning through pair and group work to enhance relatedness. Such strategies aim to cultivate intrinsic motivation among students and deepen their recognition of the significance of learning English for future endeavors. To facilitate the implementation of such strategies, educational institutions should allocate resources to organize low-cost extracurricular English activities, utilize community-based materials, and strengthen peer mentoring systems. Even in resource-constrained rural contexts, schools can leverage existing social and cultural capitals. Furthermore, parents should be encouraged to partake in their children's learning journey by maintaining regular communication with teachers and providing emotional encouragement at home. Finally, policymakers had better ensure flexible and inclusive English language curricula and teacher training programs that equip teachers with SDT-based strategies, and cross-sectoral collaboration to create an ecosystem that sustains students' motivation. Hopefully, grounding professional practices in the SDT serves to fulfill students' psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness, nurturing their intrinsic motivation, facilitating the internalization process, and contributing to more equitable learning outcomes across contexts.

Limitations

Although this study has achieved its aim, it also bears certain limitations due to time constraints and the small sample size. Future studies can bridge these gaps by employing longitudinal research designs and mixed-methods designs to provide a more comprehensive insight into contextual influences on EFL students' motivation in learning English. Moreover, future research should compare English learning motivation among low-, middle-, and high-achieving

students or among students with different demographic information. These endeavors may shed light on a more in-depth viewpoint concerning students' motivation and exploring the contextual factors affecting the learning motivation of each student group. Teacher-researchers can subsequently establish appropriate strategies, teaching approaches, and educational policies that accurately meet the needs and characteristics of each group.

Ethics Statement

The current study was carried out in accordance with ethical considerations for research involving human participants. Prior to their formal participation, participants were informed about the research aim. As to data collection and analysis, informed consent was obtained from four participants. Also, they were assured of their anonymity and confidentiality, and pseudonyms were used to protect their individual information.

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Generative AI Statement

This study was originally conducted with the authentic ideas, theoretical framework, conceptual framework, and data collection and interpretation by the researcher. ChatGPT-4 was used only for refining language accuracy and correcting written errors.

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Appendix

Sample Interview Protocol

A. External factors

1. How does your institution impact your motivation in learning English?

- 1.1. What is your typical environment for learning English at school? What resources or support systems are available to you in this environment?
- 1.2. Is the use of smartphones and Internet-accessed devices allowed in your class? How does it motivate you in learning English?
- 1.3. What extracurricular activities related to English do your institution offer to students? How do these activities impact your motivation in learning English?

2. How do your family members influence your motivation in learning English?

- 2.1. What specific expectations or pressures related to your English language learning do your parents, grandparents, and relatives?
- 2.2. What strategies do your family members or guardians implement to encourage your motivation in learning English?
- 2.3. In what ways do attitudes and behaviors of your family members or guardians impact your motivation in learning English?

3. What role do your teachers play in motivating you to learn English?

- 3.1. How do teachers' instructional styles and teaching methods affect your motivation in learning English?
- 3.2. How do teachers' personalities and behaviors affect your motivation in learning English?
- 3.3. How do teachers' classroom management affect your motivation in learning English?

4. How do your peers or classmates affect your motivation to learn English?

- 4.1. Do you feel any peer pressure or social dynamics that influence your engagement with learning English?
- 4.2. How does the dynamic within your peer group impact your enthusiasm for learning English?
- 4.3. Have you observed any specific behaviors among your classmates that either enhance or diminish your motivation in learning English?

5. How do cultural or societal community's belief influence your motivation in learning English?

- 5.1. Is English appreciated in your context? How do your society and you perceive its importance for your future?
- 5.2. Have you encountered any cultural or societal norms that impact your motivation to learn English?
- 5.3. Can you identify any other socio-cultural factors that either enhance or hinder your motivation in learning English?

B. Internal factors

1. How important is your perceived English and English knowledge to you?

- 1.1. How do you personally perceive the importance of English and its knowledge in your academic and future pursuits?
- 1.2. What is your occupation orientation? Is it related to English and English knowledge? How does the (ir)relevance affect your motivation in learning English?
- 1.3. Can you describe your personal upcoming goals and aspirations related to learning English? How do these goals influence your motivation and engagement with English language learning?

2. What is your need of accomplishment by learning English affect your motivation in learning English?

- 2.1. Would you like to achieve something by learning English (*certificates, competition winning cups, or scholarships*)? How does the need of accomplishment affect your motivation in learning English?
- 2.2. Would you like to be recognized by learning English?

2.3. Have you encountered any obstacles or setbacks in your English language learning? If so, how did you overcome them, or how do you plan to overcome them?

3. What are your personal interests in learning English? How do they impact your motivation in learning English?

3.1. Can you describe your personal interest in learning English? How do you typically set goals for yourself in English learning?

3.2. Can you identify any experiences or activities related to learning English that have sparked your curiosity or passion? How do these experiences contribute to your overall motivation in learning the language?

3.3. What specific aspects of English learning do you find challenging or uninteresting? Are there particular topics or skills that you struggle to engage with?