

# Students' Perception of How Teachers Motivate Young Language Learners in the ESOL Classroom

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## ABSTRACT

English has been considered a mandatory subject in primary schools since the Ministry of Education decided to make it an essential component of the basic education curriculum reform in 2001. However, in China, where English is counted as a foreign language, students rarely have the opportunity to practice English in an authentic environment, especially in rural areas. Thus, teachers play a crucially indispensable in motivating students to learn in a short 45-minute English classroom. This study investigates how teachers influence students' motivation in the ESOL classroom from the students' perspective. The findings confirm that the emotionally supportive interactions between teachers and students are beneficial to learning motivation. In addition, a relaxed and humorous learning atmosphere, peer interaction, and effective feedback are all variables influencing students' degree of motivation. Finally, the students also gave their suggestions on how the teacher might improve their motivation in teaching.

**Keywords:** motivation, young learners, language learning, teachers, rural areas

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Teachers' performance in the classroom exerts a profound effect on students' motivation, engagement, and the corresponding learning outcomes, especially considering the fact that their emotional support strongly contributes to enhancing the quality of teaching and learning [3]. As young learners' intrinsic motivation is lower than adults', they rely mainly on external motivation to trigger them to learn. When students are inspired to be engaged in the educational activities, they will be willing to provide effective feedback, which may improve the current and future teaching and learning experiences [11]. Correspondingly, from the standpoint of students, the study aims to investigate the relationship between teachers' emotional support and young learners' learning motivation.

## 2. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Based on the above argument, the study is designed to answer the following questions:

a. Does teacher's emotional support plays a positive role in increasing students' learning motivation?

b. What factors in the classroom will affect young learners' motivation?

c. What suggestions do students provide for improving motivation?

## 3. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 3.1 The importance of emotionally supportive interactions in the classroom

By providing emotional supports to students, teachers desire to demonstrate their genuine concern, respect, and the willingness to comprehend students' unique perspectives in lessons [8]. Through this interactive engagement, learners' individual perceptions and their learning motivation will be stimulated to a large extent.

It is also of vital significance for teachers to create an autonomous and supportive environment with abundant teachers' emotional assistance as it can positively affect learners' mental health, learning motivation, and academic achievement [10]. The research on motivation has consistently linked teachers' emotional support to student engagement and motivation. From their perspective, this psychological encouragement allows students to engage in autonomous learning, build

confidence in task-achieving competencies, and communicate with their classmates freely [12].

Human development is strongly dependent upon individuals' diverse requirements for relationships because favorable relationships can relieve learners' stress and motivate them to learn. For young learners (YLS), collaborative communication with peers is even more crucial [5]. To illustrate, different from the preschoolers who are more engaged with their parents, young students tend to spend more time with their peers after entering primary school and supervise each other on assignments provided by their teachers, including vocabulary dictating and text reciting, since they consider it a form of peer competition [2]. In addition, peer companionship also profoundly impacts the collective and individual learning outcomes within the group, with some evidence suggesting that learning is more effective with friends than with strangers [1].

### **3.2 Learning characteristics of young learners**

Some people believe that with the powerful mastery of cognitive capability and self-regulation, children have the similar process of taking in foreign language autonomously and consciously with adults [7]; however, in reality, their receptiveness to language is largely dependent on the learning context or the appropriate choice of the teaching methods [6]. Instead of the monotonous acquisition of grammatical structures or pure linguistic knowledge, they are more concerned with perceiving language as a whole, such as its discursive, contextual, or cultural implications. Besides, the fun-filled activities can also effectively accelerate the process of foreign language acquisition by motivating YLS to develop language and communication skills [9].

In addition, YLS are more interested in the embedded meaning of the language, which acts as a prerequisite medium for communication rather than the surface features of the language such as the sentence organizations or the language structural forms [7]. Due to YLS' holistic approach to learning, foreign language acquisition will be more effective when YLS are immersed in a meaningful and comprehensible language environment [6]. Furthermore, as "chronological age is not always the same as development age, particularly at primary level" [4], teachers should increase the variety of classroom activities that allow YLS to actively participate and concentrate in order to extend their limited attention span for non-participatory activities [9].

## **4. METHODOLOGY**

### **4.1 Participants**

The study was conducted in a public primary school in rural areas of Hangzhou, Zhejiang Province, where almost two-thirds of the students failed to nurture

desirable learning habits and neglected the decisive role of parental education compared with their urban counterparts whose parents were mostly migrant workers. As the researcher was a fifth-grade English teacher, fifth-grade students aged between 10 and 12 were recruited as the research subjects for the sake of convenience. They have been receiving formal education since the first grade, which lays a solid foundation for foreign language acquisition; nevertheless, due to the insufficient influence from home education, these demotivated children seem to be forced to learn English under teachers' authority.

### **4.2 Method**

In this empirical study, quantitative methods of the questionnaire were primarily employed to collect data from the participants. A total of 30 valid questionnaires were obtained from the anonymous survey. The questionnaire was divided into three sections: the first part involves the fundamental demographic information on the students such as their age, gender, and self-perceived motivation of English learning; the second part investigated students' perceptions of teacher's emotional support as well as motivation, and some factors affecting motivation; the third section is an open-ended part which requires students to supplement other factors positively impacting students' motivation to learn English and some beneficial teaching strategies improving the learning effectiveness and interests. Furthermore, as YLS may be unfamiliar with the genuine definition of motivation, the questionnaire has specified motivation as interests and behavioral involvement, such as responding to teacher's questions, paying attention, and completing the assigned tasks.

## **5. FINDINGS AND RESULTS**

### **5.1 RQ1: Does teacher's emotional support plays a positive role in increasing students' learning motivation?**

In the table below, it can be seen that almost all of the participants believe that teacher's passion, enthusiasm, and concern motivate students to pay particular attention to completing the assigned tasks (question10&11). However, with regards to teachers' attention in the classroom, 17% strongly agreed that this would increase their motivation, and 43% agreed with that, while the percentages of children who strongly disagreed and disagreed are both 20%. In summary, emotional support from teachers, such as caring and enthusiasm, favorably functions in increasing YLS' motivation to acquire a foreign language, whereas other behaviors and factors may also negatively affect their motivation because of their natural obedience to the teacher's authority.

**Table 1:** the attitude towards teachers' emotionally supportive interactions

Survey content	Options	Responses: No. (%)	Notes
10. You concentrate better when the teacher is passionate and enthusiastic in the classroom	A. Strongly agree	40%	
	B. Agree	57%	
	C. Strongly disagree	3%	
	D. disagree	0	
11. You will be more willing to complete assigned tasks when you can feel the teacher's concern	A. Strongly agree	57%	
	B. Agree	40%	
	C. Strongly disagree	0	
	D. disagree	3%	
15. The attention you receive from your teachers can affect your motivation to learn	A. Strongly agree	17%	
	B. Agree	43%	
	C. Strongly disagree	20%	
	D. disagree	20%	
16. Effective feedback and specific advice from your teacher will have a positive impact on your learning motivation	A. Strongly agree	20%	
	B. Agree	47%	
	C. Strongly disagree	23%	
	D. disagree	10%	

**5.2. RQ2: What factors in the classroom will affect young learners' motivation?**

Table 1 reveals that rather than dominantly determining students' learning behavior and motivation, teachers can merely exert a certain impact and other influencers will be explored in the following sections.

**Table 2:** "Interacting with your peers will make you want to be more involved in the classroom"

Strongly agree	agree	Strongly disagree	disagree
23%	73%	0%	3%

As can be shown in Table 2, almost all of the students (97%) acknowledged they are more active and engaged in the classroom when interacting with their peers as no one wants to be left behind. The interactive communication among peers encourages them to nurture interpersonal skills and be immersed in exploring the language at the same time.

**Table 3:** "When immersed in a relaxed, laughter-filled and welcoming classroom atmosphere, you will feel at ease and want to export your language"

Strongly agree	agree	Strongly disagree	disagree
43%	40%	7%	10%

In addition, a comfortable and encouraging learning environment serves as emotional support for increased motivation. More than two-thirds of students felt that they would be more likely to practice and produce English in a relaxed atmosphere because according to the affective filter hypothesis, the anxiety and apprehension may cost students excessive energy to suppress before they can concentrate on completing the task. Also, the human-environment fit, which refers to the harmonious matches between the educational institutions and the interests, needs, and values of students, allows students to increase their cultural and social identity with the school, thus promoting their learning motivation.

Thirdly, according to the open-ended questions in the questionnaire, participants mentioned a variety of other behaviors and variables that might affect their motivation, such as "the English level of the classmates"; "surrounding learning environment"; "noisy classroom"; "a fun-filled learning atmosphere"; "the acceptance level of the class content".

**5.3 RQ 3: What suggestions do students provide for improving motivation?**

**Table 4:** "teachers' emotionally supportive interactions can affect your learning motivation"

Strongly agree	agree	Strongly disagree	disagree
23%	37%	20%	20%

From the analysis of Table 4, almost two-thirds of the participants believed that teachers' emotionally supportive interactions positively correlate with their learning motivation. Accordingly, it can be concluded

that teachers should fully prepare for each lesson, adhere to the student-oriented teaching model, establish an equal teacher-student relationship, deliver genuine inner care and love to students, and exert an effective and advantageous influence on their emotions.

According to Table 5, the diverse arrangement of the course activities and the team cooperation have a positive impact on students' classroom participation and motivation. Therefore, teachers should not only make efforts to incorporate group activities into the daily educational routine but also take students' varying English proficiency into account so that every child has the opportunity to participate in meaningful peer interaction. In this process, teachers demonstrate their emphasis on students' viewpoints by encouraging students to passionately exchange creative thoughts within the groups.

**Table 5:** “participating in interesting teaching activities such as group activities, role play, classroom games will make you want to participate in the class”

Strongly agree	agree	Strongly disagree	disagree
60%	40%	0%	0%

The development of self-determination, which means the independent regulation of personal behavior, is highly reliant on the satisfaction of individual's requirements for autonomy, relatedness, and competence. As shown in Table 6, all participants, except one who disagreed, believed that they were more willing to provide suggestions when they were informed that the feedback would be beneficial for improving teaching. Therefore, teachers should make students' feedback transparent, visualize both theoretical and practical significance of the feedback in advance, and modify their teaching activities in accordance with students' perceived experiences.

**Table 6:** “you will be willing to provide feedback when you know that the feedback you provide can contribute to the overall classroom teaching”

Strongly agree	agree	Strongly disagree	disagree
30%	60%	0%	10%

Furthermore, some suggestions proposed by participants to improve their learning motivation include “make the language learning a fun-filled game”, “apply self-learning”, “give rewards, such as small snacks and toys”, “give some punishment to students who do not comply with classroom discipline”, “teachers can be more humorous and talk more about their own experiences”.

## 6. CONCLUSION

This study examined the influence of teachers on young learners' motivation in the classroom from students' perspectives by using a questionnaire. The findings demonstrate that teachers' emotionally supportive interactions have a favorable impact on increasing YLs' learning motivation. In addition to teacher's affective assistance, other influencers include peer interaction, an engaging, supportive, and humorous learning environment, and YLs' autonomy in learning. Therefore, teachers should establish an equal teacher-student relationship in the classroom, create a relaxed and enjoyable atmosphere, afford YLs more opportunities to communicate and exchange their innovative perceptions, design diverse kinds of teaching activities with group work and peer interaction, and so on.

However, there are still some limitations to this study. Firstly, the number and the diversity of participants were limited as they were all from the same class. Secondly, the study relied solely on questionnaires and failed to employ a combination of quantitative and qualitative research approaches, which would have provided a more comprehensive analysis. Therefore, additional studies needed to be conducted to further investigate the relevant field thoroughly.

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