FOREIGN LANGUAGES AND VIETNAMESE

SUSTAINING FACTORS FOR ENGLISH LEARNING MOTIVATION AMONG FIRST-YEAR ENGLISH MAJORS AT AN EFL HIGHER-EDUCATION INSTITUTION: AN EMPIRICAL INVESTIGATION

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ABSTRACT: This study investigated conditions associated with sustained English learning motivation among first-year English majors in an EFL higher-education setting. Drawing on Self-Determination Theory and a socio-motivational perspective, it examined competence, autonomy, relatedness, and future-oriented engagement. The quantitative strand involved 280 first-year English majors who completed a 30-item structured questionnaire. All 280 returned questionnaires were retained, although isolated item nonresponse resulted in valid Ns of 276-280. The qualitative strand comprised focus-group discussions with 15 purposively selected students. Quantitative data were analyzed descriptively, and qualitative data were analyzed thematically. The findings indicate that sustained motivation is associated with perceived progress and competence, supportive teacher and peer relationships, autonomous learning opportunities, and the future value of English. Peer relations were notably ambivalent: collaboration could strengthen relatedness and motivation, whereas social comparison could undermine confidence. Sustained engagement was most evident when English was connected to personally meaningful activities, authentic communication, and future career goals. The findings suggest that motivation in EFL higher education is better understood as a socially and pedagogically situated process than as a stable learner characteristic.

KEY WORDS: Sustained motivation; English learning motivation; EFL higher education; first-year English majors; mixed-methods study.

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1. Introduction

English has become an important resource in higher education, supporting academic participation, employability, communication, and international mobility. In EFL settings, however, opportunities to use English beyond formal instruction may be limited, making the maintenance of learner motivation particularly consequential (Alizadeh, 2016; Dörnyei & Csizér, 1998). Understanding sustained motivation therefore requires attention not only to learners' initial interest in English but also to the conditions that help them continue investing effort over time.

Motivation has long been associated with learners' effort, persistence, and engagement in language learning. Perceived self-efficacy - confidence in one's capacity to manage difficulty, invest effort, and overcome obstacles - is especially relevant because learners who believe they can succeed are generally more willing to persist in challenging tasks (Bandura, 1997; Pajares, 1996). Yet sustained language-learning motivation cannot be understood solely as an individual psychological characteristic; it is also shaped by the social and educational contexts in which learning occurs.

Self-Determination Theory (SDT) provides a useful framework for understanding this interaction by

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conceptualizing motivation in relation to the psychological needs for competence, autonomy, and relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Competence concerns a sense of effectiveness and progress, autonomy concerns volition and meaningful choice, and relatedness concerns supportive connection with others. In EFL higher education, these needs may be shaped by classroom practices, relationships with teachers and peers, and opportunities to use English meaningfully beyond formal lessons.

This needs-based perspective is compatible with socio-motivational approaches that view language-learning motivation as dynamic, socially situated, and connected to learners' developing identities and imagined futures (Ushioda, 2011). In EFL contexts, where everyday exposure to English may be limited, future goals such as employment, academic achievement, mobility, and international communication can give continued language learning personal meaning.

Research on learner autonomy and communicative language teaching further suggests that sustained engagement is supported when learners participate actively and find opportunities to use English beyond the classroom (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). In EFL higher education, self-directed learning, online communication, peer interaction, and personally meaningful language use may partly compensate for limited naturalistic exposure. Sustained motivation can therefore be examined as an interaction among perceived competence, autonomy support, supportive relationships, and future-oriented language investment.

Despite these insights, self-efficacy, teacher support, peer support, autonomy, and future-oriented meaning are often examined as separate motivational variables. Less attention has been paid to how these resources interact in the experiences of first-year English majors or how they are translated into continued engagement inside and outside the classroom. This issue is particularly relevant during the first year of university, when students are adapting to new academic, social, and professional expectations.

Accordingly, this study investigates sustained English learning motivation among first-year English majors in an EFL higher-education setting. Motivation is treated not as a fixed personal trait but as a socially mediated and educationally situated process shaped by competence, autonomy, supportive relationships, and future-oriented meaning. The study addresses the following research questions:

RQ1. What classroom, interpersonal, and institutional conditions shape students' sustained motivation to learn English?

RQ2. How do these conditions support or constrain students' sense of competence, autonomy, and relatedness?

RQ3. How do students translate motivational resources into continued engagement with English inside and outside the classroom?

Together, these questions conceptualize sustained motivation as a contextualized phenomenon involving psychological needs, social relationships, learning conditions, and future-oriented engagement. The study contributes by examining these elements within one explanatory mixed-methods design rather than treating them as isolated motivational factors.

2. Literature Review

2.1. English learning motivation as a dynamic construct

Motivation is a central variable in second- and foreign-language learning because it is closely associated with learners' effort, persistence, and engagement. Learners are more likely to continue investing effort when English is perceived as worthwhile and personally meaningful, whereas weak motivational value can make sustained engagement difficult (Alizadeh, 2016). This issue is especially salient in EFL contexts, where opportunities to use English outside formal instruction may be limited.

Motivation should therefore not be understood from a purely individual perspective. Learners' beliefs about their competence interact with teacher-mediated instruction, peer relationships, and opportunities for meaningful language use. A dynamic account of sustained motivation must consequently consider both internal experience and the social and pedagogical conditions in which that experience develops.

2.2. Competence and self-efficacy

Self-efficacy remains one of the best-researched motivational variables in language learning. Strong correlations were found between high self-efficacy and participation, persistence and self-regulation (Yang & Gan, 2024). In general, high self-efficacy can be considered as a source of willingness to put efforts and engage in difficult tasks (Bandura & Locke, 2003; Pajares, 1996). It can provide a base for readiness to face challenges, while low self-efficacy can lead to avoidance and lack of persistence (Bandura, 1997; Pajares, 1996). Competence thus could be both a product and a resource of motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2000).

2.3. Teacher support and pedagogical mediation

EFL research likewise highlights teacher support as an important condition for motivation and engagement. Caring and encouraging teacher behavior can contribute to engagement through learners' self-efficacy and peer relations (Wu & Cai, 2025). Practices that reduce anxiety, build confidence, and encourage participation may therefore create more supportive motivational conditions, particularly where opportunities for authentic English use outside the classroom are limited (Brophy, 2004; Pintrich & Schunk, 2002).

2.4. Peer support and socially mediated learning

Peer relationships can affect students' emotional state and readiness for participation. Students can get encouragement, cooperation, feedback and social comparison from their peers, making this factor an important source of relatedness and competence at the same time. Still, peer influence is not always positive - difference in competencies, unequal participation and social comparison can reduce learners' confidence and willingness to communicate. Thus, the ambivalence of this motivational factor makes it crucial to analyze peer relationships together with competence rather than considering social support as a purely positive factor.

From a socio-motivational perspective, peer relationships can contribute simultaneously to relatedness and competence. Interaction with classmates can provide validation, explanation, corrective feedback, and opportunities for collaborative meaning-making. However, peer influence may also be constraining: social comparison, proficiency differences, unequal participation, or disengaged group members can reduce confidence and willingness to communicate. Peer support should therefore be examined as a potentially ambivalent motivational resource rather than assumed to be uniformly positive.

2.5. Learner autonomy and self-directed motivational maintenance

Learner autonomy is especially important for sustained motivation in EFL contexts, when access to English outside of the formal instructional process may be limited. Learner autonomy is related to learners' ability to choose and control their learning by setting goals, using strategies, and reflecting on what they do. According to Self-Determination Theory, learner autonomy is concerned with volition rather than independent learning (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Self-directed engagement can thus help EFL higher education learners apply English beyond the scope of formal classes and link learning to personally relevant activities and future aspirations (Ushioda, 2011).

2.6. Toward an updated socio-motivational framework

The literature therefore suggests that EFL motivation cannot be adequately explained as an individual learner characteristic. Teacher support, peer relations, self-efficacy, autonomy, and future-

oriented meaning may interact throughout the learning process. For example, caring teacher behavior may be associated with engagement through self-efficacy and peer support (Wu & Cai, 2025), while SDT proposes that competence, autonomy, and relatedness support more self-determined forms of motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2000). A socio-motivational account consequently needs to consider learners' psychological experience together with the social and pedagogical conditions that shape it.

In sum, the literature supports a model of interaction between competence, autonomy, and relatedness with social mediation and future-oriented meaning. However, such resources of motivation tend to be studied independently as either predictors or correlates of motivation. At the same time, less is known about how the interaction between them is experienced by first-year English majors and transformed into sustained classroom and out-of-class motivation during the transition to university. The current study helps to address this knowledge gap by combining quantitative trends and qualitative accounts of first-year English majors' experience of their interaction and transformation into sustained motivation. Sustained motivation for English learning is thus treated here as a situated process mediated by perceived progress, supportive relationships, opportunities for autonomous and meaningful language learning, and imagined future use of English.

3. Research Methodology

3.1. Research design

An explanatory mixed-methods design was adopted to investigate how first-year English majors sustain their motivation to learn English in an EFL higher-education setting. Mixed methods were appropriate because the study required both a descriptive overview of motivational patterns and an interpretive account of how students experienced those conditions. In an explanatory design, qualitative evidence can elaborate and contextualize patterns identified in quantitative data (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). Accordingly, the questionnaire provided a broad descriptive overview, while focus-group data were used to explain how motivational conditions were experienced and negotiated by participants. Table 1 summarizes the design.

Table 1. *Mixed-methods design*

Research component	Purpose	Data source	Analytical role
Quantitative strand	To identify broad patterns in students' perceptions of sustained English learning motivation	Structured questionnaire	Descriptive overview of motivational conditions
Qualitative strand	To explain how those motivational conditions were experienced and sustained by learners	Focus group discussions	Interpretive elaboration of quantitative patterns
Integration	To connect broad trends with learner accounts	Joint interpretation of both strands	Explanatory understanding of sustained motivation

3.2. Participants and context

The study was conducted in an EFL higher-education setting with first-year English-major students. First-year students were selected because entry into university involves changes in academic expectations, social relationships, and emerging professional goals, making this transition particularly relevant to the study of sustained motivation. Table 2 presents the participants and data sources. In the quantitative strand, 280 first-year English-major students took part in the study. A questionnaire was given to 280 students and 280 returned questionnaires were used in data analysis. Some participants chose to skip some items; therefore, item-level valid N ranged from 276 to 280. This did not result in

any case-level exclusion. In the qualitative strand, 15 students were purposively sampled to represent multiple perspectives about motivation, challenges, support, and self-directed learning.

Table 2. *Participants and data sources*

Strand	Participants	Sampling approach	Data source
Quantitative	280 first-year English-major students	Accessible/convenience-based classroom survey	Questionnaire responses
Qualitative	15 purposively selected first-year English-major students	Purposive sampling	Focus group discussions and transcripts

3.3. Instruments

Two instruments were employed. First, a structured 30-item questionnaire elicited students' perceptions of course usefulness, teaching effectiveness, challenge, support, competence and confidence, social interaction, relevance, authentic language use, and access to learning resources. For descriptive interpretation, the items were organized into four theory-informed analytical dimensions: Institutional/Classroom Support, Competence and Confidence, Interaction and Relatedness, and Future/Authentic Engagement. Because psychometric validation and internal-consistency estimates were not available, these dimensions are treated as descriptive analytical groupings rather than validated scales. Second, a semi-structured focus-group guide explored learning challenges, sources of motivation, self-maintenance strategies, classroom participation, teacher and peer influence, perceived institutional support, preferred resources, and anticipated future uses of English. The focus groups enabled participants to elaborate shared experiences and helped explain patterns identified in the questionnaire. Table 3 maps the instruments onto the research questions.

Table 3. *Correspondence of the instruments to the research questions*

Research question	Quantitative indicator(s)	Qualitative focus
RQ1. What classroom, interpersonal, and institutional conditions shape students' sustained motivation to learn English?	Relevance of the course, effectiveness of the instruction, support, practical application, resources	Difficulties, motivators, teacher/peer impact, institutional support
RQ2. How do these conditions support or constrain students' sense of competence, autonomy, and relatedness?	Confidence, challenge level, interaction, collaboration, support	Confidence, anxiety, self-study, teacher support, peer relationships
RQ3. How do students translate motivational resources into continued engagement with English inside and outside the classroom?	Communication, cooperation, real world connections, out-of-class materials	In-class involvement, self-regulation, further use of English

3.4. Data collection procedures

Quantitative data were collected through the structured questionnaire administered to 280 first-year English majors. All 280 returned questionnaires were retained as cases for analysis. Because a small number of individual items were unanswered, item-level valid N ranged from 276 to 280. Qualitative data were collected through focus-group discussions with 15 purposively selected students. The discussions were conducted in Vietnamese, transcribed, and translated into English for reporting.

The sequential procedure supported the explanatory purpose of the study: the questionnaire identified broad motivational patterns, while the focus groups provided contextualized accounts of how students experienced, interpreted, and maintained motivation.

***Table 4**. Data Collection Procedures*

Stage	Activity	Output
Stage 1	Administration of structured questionnaire	Quantitative data set on motivational perceptions
Stage 2	Students for focus groups selection	Qualitative sample for in-depth discussion
Stage 3	Focus groups discussions in Vietnamese	Audio-recorded discussion data
Stage 4	Transcription of recordings	Textual corpus for thematic analysis

3.5. Data analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed descriptively using means, standard deviations, and response percentages. Statistics for individual items were calculated from available responses, resulting in item-level valid Ns of 276-280. For Table 5, the four theory-informed analytical dimensions were summarized across their constituent items using available responses, with all 280 respondents retained at the case level. These summaries are used descriptively and are not interpreted as validated latent constructs or as evidence of causal relationships.

Qualitative data were analyzed thematically following a process of familiarization, initial coding, theme development, theme refinement, and construction of the final thematic account (Ahmed et al., 2025; Braun & Clarke, 2021). Coding combined deductive and inductive procedures. Deductive coding was informed by the study's conceptual framework, particularly competence, autonomy, relatedness, and future-oriented engagement. Inductive coding captured additional issues raised by participants, including speaking anxiety, peer comparison, dissatisfaction with institutional support, and enjoyment of English through films, music, and video games.

The two strands were then integrated into the interpretation process. In line with the logic of integrating mixed-methods evidence, quantitative patterns were compared to qualitative themes in order to highlight convergences, elaborations, and tensions (Fetters et al., 2013). While the survey data provided relative prominence of the motivational conditions reported, the focus groups provided qualitative descriptions of the way the students experienced them in both classroom and out-of-class situations. Table 9 provides examples of integration through the comparison of selected quantitative patterns with qualitative themes and integrated interpretations.

3.6. Ethical considerations

Ethical principles of informed consent, voluntary participation, anonymity, and the right to withdraw guided the study. Participants were informed about the purpose of the research and participated voluntarily. Questionnaire findings were reported in aggregate form without personally identifying information, and qualitative data were reported using participant codes rather than names. Focus-group quotations were attributed only to non-identifying codes (e.g., SM1 and SF1). Because focus groups

involve shared discussion, quotations were selected and reported in ways that avoided disclosure of personally identifying information.

4. Findings and Discussion

This section presents findings for each research question and interprets them within the study's socio-motivational framework. Quantitative results identify descriptive patterns, while qualitative evidence explains how participants experienced those patterns. Integration focuses on convergence, elaboration, and tension between the two strands rather than on causal inference.

RQ1. What classroom, interpersonal, and institutional conditions shape students' sustained motivation to learn English?

The first research question examined the motivational conditions identified by participants. As shown in Table 5, Future/Authentic Engagement had the highest descriptive dimension mean (M = 3.64, SD = 0.67), followed by Competence and Confidence (M = 3.57, SD = 0.70), Interaction and Relatedness (M = 3.56, SD = 0.72), and Institutional/Classroom Support (M = 3.50, SD = 0.72). These dimensions are descriptive theory-informed groupings rather than validated psychometric scales.

Table 5. *Theory-informed analytical dimensions of sustained English learning motivation*

Analytical dimension	Items	Case N	Mean	SD	Agree/ Strongly Agree (%)
Institutional/Classroom Support	1, 2, 5, 7, 21, 25, 28	280	3.50	0.72	57.6
Competence and Confidence	3, 6, 10, 15, 22, 23, 29	280	3.57	0.70	62.9
Interaction and Relatedness	8, 9, 14, 16, 18, 24	280	3.56	0.72	59.9
Future/Authentic Engagement	4, 11, 12, 13, 17, 19, 20, 26, 27, 30	280	3.64	0.67	65.5

At item level (Table 6), the strongest endorsement concerned opportunities extending beyond routine classroom work, including exchange, online resources, development of the four language skills, real-life application, tutoring, and communicative activities. Item-level valid N ranged from 276 to 280 because of isolated nonresponse. Overall, the pattern suggests that students associated sustained motivation with perceived competence, useful resources, and opportunities for meaningful engagement rather than classroom exposure alone.

***Table* 6**. *Quantitative indicators rated highest for sustaining English learning motivation*

Rank	Item	Valid N	Mean	SD	Agree/ Strongly Agree n (%)
1	Access to exchange programs with native English speakers would increase motivation	279	3.78	0.84	198 (71.0%)
2	Access to online English learning resources would increase motivation	280	3.76	0.83	197 (70.4%)
3	English courses help develop listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills	276	3.68	0.82	189 (68.5%)
4	English courses help students	279	3.68	0.89	187 (67.0%)

	appreciate the value of English in today's world				
5	English courses challenge students to improve their English skills	276	3.67	0.85	187 (67.8%)
6	Access to tutoring services would increase motivation	279	3.64	0.85	187 (67.0%)
7	English courses provide opportunities to apply English in real-life situations	279	3.64	0.86	186 (66.7%)
8	English courses provide interactive and communicative activities with classmates	279	3.65	0.86	183 (65.6%)

Table 7 presents the comparatively lower-rated indicators, including collaboration in English projects, real-life application, teaching methods, faculty support, and existing learning resources. Although agreement remained more common than disagreement, neutral and negative responses were more frequent for these items than for the highest-rated indicators. The pattern does not indicate an absence of motivation toward English; rather, it suggests uneven support within the learning environment. This interpretation is consistent with a socio-motivational perspective in which engagement is partly shaped by conditions that support competence, relatedness, autonomy, and relevance.

***Table** 7. Quantitative indicators rated lowest*

Rank	Item	Valid N	Mean	SD	Agree/Strongly Agree n (%)	Neutral n (%)	Disagree/Strongly Disagree n (%)
1	Potential for collaboration in English projects	278	3.44	0.92	149 (53.6%)	89 (32.0%)	40 (14.4%)
2	Opportunities to practise English in real-life situations	279	3.46	0.95	155 (55.6%)	83 (29.7%)	41 (14.7%)
3	Teaching methods effectively promote English learning	279	3.47	0.90	155 (55.6%)	89 (31.9%)	35 (12.5%)
4	Faculty provides adequate support for English learning needs	279	3.50	0.91	159 (57.0%)	86 (30.8%)	34 (12.2%)
5	Current English learning resources are sufficient	278	3.50	0.91	163 (58.6%)	81 (29.1%)	34 (12.2%)

However, the qualitative findings provided explanatory elaborations for these quantitative patterns. The respondents associated motivation with progress, accessibility of teachers, relationship with peers, participation in interesting activities and future usefulness of English language. One respondent tied his

online communication experience with his future aim to teach English language: "I like to play games on the Internet with foreign friends. Therefore, I need good English skills in order to talk to them... Also, in the future, I would like to teach English" (SM1, Focus Group 1). Another one stressed the importance of learning English because of its occupational significance: "English is very important since it can be used in the future for my work" (SF1, Focus Group 1). The accessibility of teachers was another motivational aspect: "When the teacher speaks easily and there is no barrier between the teacher and the students, I will speak out with confidence" (SM2, Focus Group 1). These quotations explain why the survey results indicate the importance of future use of English language and the significance of support as motivational factors. Therefore, the first research question identifies the complex set of factors, including competence, social support, authenticity, and future utility, but not one determinant of motivation.

RQ2. How do these conditions support or constrain students' sense of competence, autonomy, and relatedness?

The second research question examined how the conditions identified in RQ1 were associated with students' experiences of competence, autonomy, and relatedness.

Competence: *Competence and Confidence had the second-highest descriptive dimension mean (Table 5), and several indicators related to skill development and confidence were among the more highly rated items. This pattern is consistent with self-efficacy research linking perceived competence with effort and persistence (Bandura, 1997; Pajares, 1996). In the present study, competence appears not only as an outcome of learning but also as a motivational resource: perceived progress can encourage further engagement. Qualitative accounts also show why competence should not be treated as uniformly positive. Students described writing difficulty, speaking anxiety, pronunciation problems, and reading fatigue, while also identifying vocabulary growth, improved communication, and successful presentations as signs of motivating progress. SM4, for example, described the satisfaction of understanding a previously unfamiliar word in context, while SF4 reported that regular pronunciation practice increased confidence in speaking before others. These accounts are consistent with the SDT view that experiences of competence can support motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2000), while repeated difficulty may constrain it.*

Relatedness: *Relatedness was expressed primarily through relationships with teachers and peers. Participants frequently described approachable teachers as sources of encouragement, guidance, and psychological safety. Teachers were sometimes portrayed not only as instructors but also as mentors who connected English study with professional and personal development. SF6 recalled a teacher whose experiences using English while travelling inspired her interest in the language, while SM1 described a teacher who helped establish a long-term goal of becoming an English teacher and translator. These accounts align with research connecting teacher caring, self-efficacy, peer support, and academic engagement (Wu & Cai, 2025). In this sample, teacher support appears to connect relatedness with competence by making classroom participation feel safer and more achievable.*

However, relatedness to peers was ambivalent. Participants reported seeing their classmates as potential helpers, supporters, and co-generators of progress: "If we are weak at something, but others are good at that thing, we can help each other out; and friends play a very important role" (SM7, Focus Group 2). Comparison could also motivate students by stimulating efforts, as SF8 stated that noticing his classmates progressing faster motivated him to work harder. However, superior peers could induce feelings of insufficiency, and negligent peers – reduce participation intentions. This finding casts doubt on the simple idea that relatedness always motivates. Relations with peers can be supporting belonging, but at the same time, decrease perceived competence due to comparison. Therefore, the contribution is

not only the recognition of the motivational role of peers, but an understanding that the motivational nature of peer relations depends on the experience of collaboration and comparison.

Autonomy: Autonomy was most explicit in participants' accounts of sustaining English beyond formal lessons. Students described watching films, listening to English songs, using learning applications, recording new vocabulary, searching for information online, and connecting English with video games. In this context, autonomy did not mean learning in isolation; rather, it involved incorporating English into personal routines and exercising volition over how the language was used. This interpretation is consistent with SDT, in which autonomy concerns volition rather than independence from others (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Moreover, autonomous activities were related to future goals and interests. SF3 learned vocabulary from English-language movies, while SF4 saw that music could be both entertaining and helpful in terms of learning new words. SM1 associated the combination of playing games with foreigners with her wish to learn English better. These examples go beyond the quantitative stress on authentic opportunities: students did not just ask for additional resources; they personally created the English environment when the formal contact with the language was insufficient. Therefore, autonomy became an instrument of extending motivation from the classroom to personal life, while future meaning made it worthy (Ushioda, 2011).

Table 8. *Thematic coding summary of the qualitative findings (15 focus-group participants)*

Parent theme	Illustrative subthemes	Participants mentioning theme (n = 15)	Interpretive note
Competence-related barriers	writing difficulty, speaking anxiety, pronunciation problems, reading fatigue, exam pressure	15	Competence was the most pervasive motivational condition; students were motivated when they perceived improvement and discouraged when they experienced repeated difficulty.
Teacher support as motivational mediation	approachable teachers, reduced distance, guidance, encouragement, practical orientation, feedback	13	Teachers were described not only as instructors but as emotional and academic anchors who helped stabilize motivation.
Peer influence and social comparison	mutual help, shared major identity, peer encouragement, pressure from stronger peers, distraction from weaker peers	15	Peer relations were highly influential but ambivalent: they could inspire effort or generate anxiety and comparison.
Autonomous out-of-class learning	films, songs, gaming, apps, vocabulary note-taking, imitation, self-set routines	15	Motivation was often maintained through self-directed practices rather than through classroom instruction alone.
Future-oriented and instrumental motivation	jobs, graduation, salary, social mobility, travel, communication with foreigners, teaching/translation careers	15	Students consistently linked English to future selves, making instrumental value a major source of sustained motivation.
Need for more	conversation environments,	12	Students wanted richer, more

authentic opportunities and resources	real-life practice, clubs, tutoring, updated resources, exchange opportunities		realistic English-use ecologies beyond textbook-based learning.

Concerning RQ2, competence, autonomy, and relatedness were interdependent psychological components. Teacher support could reinforce relatedness and competence; autonomous routines connected personal volition with competence development; peer relations could encourage belonging, but at the same time discourage confidence through comparison. Qualitative frequencies in Table 8 only show the recurrence of themes in these 15 focus-group accounts and cannot be used to rank them in terms of thematic significance or to estimate prevalence beyond the qualitative sample. Thus, the mixed-methods data extend the needs-based account by revealing the interdependence of competence, autonomy, and relatedness: the same social condition, especially peer relations, could support one need and limit another.

RQ3. How do students translate motivational resources into continued engagement with English inside and outside the classroom?

The third research question examined how motivational resources were translated into sustained engagement. Across the two strands, motivation was reflected not only in favorable attitudes but also in classroom participation and voluntary English use beyond formal lessons. Qualitative evidence was particularly useful for elaborating the relatively strong Future/Authentic Engagement pattern identified in the questionnaire.

In class, students engaged in preparation of the lesson, attentive listening, answering and posing questions, giving opinions and participating in class activities. At the same time, participation was contingent on confidence, approachability of the teacher, interactivity of the tasks and classroom atmosphere. SF5 indicated that preparation at home facilitated the interaction with questions of teachers, while SM1 reported reluctance to give an answer due to the fear of making a mistake. SF6 also mentioned hesitation in case of insufficiently engaging activities. In other words, participants' readiness for participation depended on their sense of competence and psychological safety; motivational resources manifested themselves as engagement when classroom conditions offered enough interaction and manageable risks.

Outside of class, engagement involved films, music, games, mobile technology, vocabulary activities, online communication and future professional plans. SM1 related continuing English studies to the ambition of becoming an English lecturer, while SF7 shared experience of observing and investigating new words in films. Such pattern aligns with Ushioda's (2011) conception of language motivation as identity-driven and oriented towards meaningful activity and future self-image. This finding, in turn, helps to explain the apparently contradictory nature of relatively high general level of motivation and low scores for certain current opportunities - learners were ready to make investments in English language, but learning environments did not offer authentic usage of it.

Table 9. *Illustrative integration matrix linking quantitative patterns and qualitative themes*

Quantitative pattern	**Supporting qualitative theme**	**Integrated interpretation**
Highest ratings were given to exchange programs, online resources, tutoring, and real-life application opportunities	Need for more authentic opportunities and resources; autonomous out-of-class learning	Students' motivation is sustained when English is linked to authentic use and extended beyond the classroom.
Competence/confidence dimension showed one of the highest dimension means	Competence-related barriers; gradual confidence gains	Motivation is strongly tied to perceived progress and usable language competence.

Interaction and relatedness showed moderately strong endorsement	Teacher support as motivational mediation; peer influence and social comparison	Social support matters, but its effects are uneven and depend on classroom climate.
Lower ratings appeared on collaboration opportunities and real-life practice in current coursework	Need for more authentic opportunities and resources	Students do not reject English learning itself; rather, they signal gaps in the learning environment.
Future/authentic engagement recorded the highest dimension mean	Future-oriented and instrumental motivation	Learners' motivation is largely sustained by future selves and the perceived utility of English.

To address RQ3, the synthesis of evidence indicates the existence of two types of sustained effort, namely, classroom engagement facilitated by confidence and interaction and out-of-class engagement embedded in relevant activities and future plans. In Table 9, convergence refers to instances when the findings from the survey and focus groups pointed in the same direction, elaboration refers to instances where the explanation of a quantitative finding was provided by the qualitative data, and tension represents situations when positive motivation went hand-in-hand with gaps in collaboration, real-world application, and resources.

Across the three research questions, motivation emerged as socially and pedagogically contingent rather than stable or purely dispositional. Competence, relatedness, autonomy, and future relevance were interconnected, but these relationships were not uniformly reinforcing. Peer interaction, for example, could strengthen belonging while social comparison undermined confidence; similarly, strong future orientation could coexist with dissatisfaction about current opportunities for authentic English use.

The findings therefore suggest a mismatch not between students and English learning itself, but between some motivational needs and features of the learning environment. Limited interaction, inconsistent collaboration, classroom-bound learning, and weak connections to real-world English use may constrain the translation of positive motivational orientations into sustained effort. EFL curricula should therefore support confidence, meaningful interaction, learner autonomy, and opportunities to use English beyond formal classroom tasks.

5. Conclusion

This mixed-methods study examined conditions associated with sustained English learning motivation among first-year English majors. Participants generally reported positive motivational orientations. Future/Authentic Engagement had the highest descriptive dimension mean, followed by Competence and Confidence, Interaction and Relatedness, and Institutional/Classroom Support. The qualitative strand helped explain how these conditions became motivational resources - or constraints - in students' everyday English learning.

The principal theoretical contribution lies in showing how competence, relatedness, autonomy, and future orientation can operate interdependently within a socio-motivational account of sustained engagement. Teacher support may connect relatedness with competence by reducing psychological barriers to participation. Autonomous practices can connect personal choice with skill development. Peer relations can foster belonging while undermining confidence through social comparison. Sustained motivation is therefore better understood as an interaction among psychological needs, social relations, and opportunities for meaningful language use than as a fixed learner attribute.

Four pedagogical priorities follow from these findings. First, teachers can make progress visible through scaffolded tasks and constructive feedback, particularly in speaking, writing, reading, and

pronunciation. Second, classrooms should provide psychologically safe interaction in which teacher support and peer collaboration encourage participation without intensifying competitive anxiety. Third, institutions can expand autonomy-supportive opportunities through English clubs, tutoring, speaking activities, online resources, mentoring, and exchange. Finally, classroom tasks should connect English skills with credible future applications in employment, mobility, further study, and international communication.

The mixed-methods design enabled broad descriptive patterns to be interpreted through participants' accounts. Integration also revealed issues that might have remained less visible in either strand alone, particularly the ambivalent role of peers and the coexistence of positive motivational orientations with limited authentic opportunities. Future research should examine these relationships longitudinally to determine how changes in learning conditions are associated with motivational maintenance over time.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the quantitative results are descriptive and do not support causal or predictive claims. Item-level valid N ranged from 276 to 280 because of isolated missing responses, although all 280 questionnaire cases were retained. Second, the four questionnaire dimensions were theory-informed descriptive categories; psychometric validation and internal-consistency estimates were not available, so they should not be interpreted as validated latent variables. Third, focus-group accounts are socially produced, and the theme frequencies reported for 15 participants indicate recurrence within the qualitative sample rather than population prevalence or thematic importance. Finally, the study was conducted at one institution with first-year English majors, limiting transferability to other settings. Multi-institutional and longitudinal studies using validated measures, classroom observation, and targeted interventions could test and extend the relationships proposed here.

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Các yếu tố duy trì động lực học tiếng Anh của sinh viên năm nhất chuyên ngành tiếng Anh tại một cơ sở giáo dục đại học giảng dạy tiếng Anh như một ngoại ngữ: Một nghiên cứu thực nghiệm

Tóm tắt: Nghiên cứu này khảo sát các yếu tố liên quan đến động lực học tiếng Anh bền vững ở sinh viên năm nhất chuyên ngành tiếng Anh trong môi trường giáo dục đại học giảng dạy tiếng Anh như một ngoại ngữ (EFL). Dựa trên Thuyết Tự quyết và quan điểm về động lực trong bối cảnh xã hội, nghiên cứu xem xét các khía cạnh: năng lực, tính tự chủ, sự kết nối và sự gắn kết hướng tới tương lai. Phần nghiên cứu định lượng thu hút sự tham gia của 280 sinh viên năm nhất chuyên ngành tiếng Anh thông qua một bảng câu hỏi có cấu trúc gồm 30 mục. Tất cả 280 phiếu trả lời đều được giữ lại, mặc dù việc bỏ sót một số câu hỏi riêng lẻ dẫn đến cỡ mẫu hợp lệ dao động từ 276 đến 280. Phần nghiên cứu định tính bao gồm các cuộc thảo luận nhóm tập trung với 15 sinh viên được chọn theo phương pháp chọn mẫu có chủ đích. Dữ liệu định lượng được phân tích bằng phương pháp thống kê mô tả, trong khi dữ liệu định tính được phân tích theo chủ đề. Kết quả nghiên cứu cho thấy động lực bền vững có mối liên hệ với cảm nhận về sự tiến bộ và năng lực bản thân, mối quan hệ hỗ trợ từ giảng viên và bạn bè, cơ hội học tập tự chủ cũng như giá trị của tiếng Anh đối với tương lai. Mối quan hệ với bạn bè bộc lộ những khía cạnh mâu thuẫn đáng chú ý: sự hợp tác có thể củng cố tính kết nối và động lực, trong khi sự so sánh xã hội lại có thể làm giảm sự tự tin. Sự gắn kết bền vững thể hiện rõ nhất khi việc học tiếng Anh gắn liền với các hoạt động có ý nghĩa cá nhân, giao tiếp thực tế và các mục tiêu nghề nghiệp trong tương lai. Các kết quả này gợi ý rằng động lực trong giáo dục đại học EFL nên được hiểu là một quá trình chịu ảnh hưởng bởi các yếu tố xã hội và sư phạm, thay vì chỉ là một đặc điểm ổn định của người học.

Từ khóa: Động lực bền vững; động lực học tiếng Anh; giáo dục đại học EFL; sinh viên năm nhất chuyên ngành tiếng Anh; nghiên cứu phương pháp hỗn hợp.