



## The Role of Motivational Strategies on Young EFL Learners' Basic Psychological Needs: A Self-Determination Theory Perspective

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### Article Info

### ABSTRACT

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Enhancing young learners' motivation has often been a primary concern in teaching English as a foreign language (EFL). Adopting a self-determination perspective, this research attempted to study the impact of motivational strategies implemented by teachers on young EFL learner' basic psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness. A mixed-methods design was employed in this study using questionnaires, reflective journals, and semi-structured interviews. A total of 30 EFL young learners were selected and assigned to two classes, an experimental group, in which the implementation of motivational strategies was studied, and a control group. Four motivational strategies, namely creating the basic motivational conditions, generating initial motivation, maintaining and protecting motivation, and encouraging positive self-evaluation were instructed in the experimental group. All the participants filled out two questionnaires at the end of the treatment: The Student Questionnaire on Motivational Strategies Effectiveness and The Basic Psychological Need Satisfaction and Frustration Scale. Also, young learners of the experimental group participated in semi-structured interviews. The results revealed that motivational strategies impacted young learners' competence, autonomy, and relatedness positively. Additionally, the qualitative data from the interviews and reflective journals shed more light on the young learners' autonomy, competence, and their relatedness. Findings have implications for EFL teachers and materials designers.

**Keywords:** Autonomy, Competence, Motivational Strategies, Relatedness, Young Learners

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## 1. Introduction

Promoting motivation has been one of the key concerns in L2 learning and teaching (MacIntyre & Blackie, 2012). It is considered as one of the challenges L2 teachers need to deal when teaching adults (Dörnyei, 2001) or young learners (Garton et al., 2011). This challenge is partly enhanced as the main focus of the majority of studies has been on the theoretical dimensions of motivation rather than implementing motivational strategies in the actual classroom. Such studies were mainly concerned with providing explanations about the nature of motivation, and not the way the research findings on motivation can be used by L2 teachers to maintain their learners motivated (Moskovsky et al., 2013). This is also noted by Cheng and Dörnyei (2007) who believe that “far more research has been conducted on identifying and analyzing various motives and validating motivational theories than on developing techniques to increase motivation” (p. 154).

Despite the variation in theories of motivation in terms of the definitions they provide for L2 motivation and the differences in the perspectives they take toward theoretical and operational aspects of L2 motivation, they all emphasize the central role of teachers in enhancing their learners’ level of motivation (Moskovsky et al., 2013). Teacher’s classroom practice determines to what extent they can promote L2 learners’ motivation for learning, and, as a result, enhance their L2 achievement. The motivational strategies implemented by teachers are designed to stimulate learner motivation.

Dörnyei (2001) defines motivational strategies as “those motivational influences that are consciously exerted to achieve some systematic and enduring positive effect” (p.28). He has made a systematic attempt to design a practical framework of motivational practices. In a similar vein, Guilloteaux and Dörnyei (2008) categorize motivational strategies into two groups. The first category relates to the teachers’ practices aimed at eliciting and stimulating student motivation, and the second category deals with self-regulating strategies which are adopted by learners in order to adjust their own level of motivation.

Self Determination Theory (SDT; Ryan & Deci, 2000a) proposes that addressing learners’ three basic psychological needs (BPN) of competence, autonomy, and relatedness is essential in moving from an external motivation (extrinsic) to a more integrative motivation (intrinsic) or being involved in activities because of enjoyment. In other words, when L2 learners’ competence, autonomy, and relatedness are fulfilled, they will have intrinsic motivation to be engaged in L2 learning activities.

The three basic needs of competence, autonomy, and relatedness have gained prominence in L2 learning after Noels et al (1999) implemented the theory to the field of applied linguistics for the first time. Subsequent studies (e.g., Chen et al., 2014; Jang et al., 2016) have focused on the

satisfaction of the three needs in different contexts and how their satisfaction impacted learners' L2 achievement. While some studies (e.g., Joe et al, 2017) have showed that only one of the needs influenced L2 learners' achievement, others have illustrated that satisfying a combination of the basic psychological needs in different settings may affect L2 learning differently (e.g., King & McInerney, 2014; Oga-Baldwin & Nakata, 2015).

Whilst SDT has been theoretically explained in various studies (Clément, & Vallerand, 2003; Niemiec & Ryan, 2009; Noels et al., 2003), fewer studies have focused on whether it is applicable in L2 classes and even less research has explored this concept from the viewpoint of L2 learners. In other terms, there is a fairly limited number of studies examining the application of motivational practices in L2 (e.g., Guilloteaux & Dörnyei, 2008; Moskovsky et al., 2013). Considering this gap in the literature and the importance of empirical studies on motivational strategies, McEown and Takeuchi (2014) called on L2 researchers to study the effect of motivational strategies implemented by teachers on students' motivation using an SDT perspective. This study is an attempt to respond to this call by examining the effect of motivational strategies being implemented by the teacher on young L2 learners' basic psychological needs of competence, autonomy, and relatedness.

## **2. Literature Review**

A review of L2 motivation theory and research highlights two significant issues: the first point concerns the application of L2 motivational strategies in the actual classroom. Several publications have provided comprehensive overview of L2 motivation as a construct (e.g., Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011; Ushioda, 2013) and a considerable body of research is devoted to studies concentrating on presenting and classifying motivational strategies which can be implemented in L2 classes (e.g., Dörnyei, 2001; Williams & Burden, 1997). In a study on SDT, Alamer and Lee (2019) proposed a model through which they explained how learners' three basic needs are related to their achievement in L2. In their model, different constructs from major theories of motivation were also taken into consideration. Their findings indicated a positive link between learners' internal motivation and their L2 success. They suggested that learners' motivational orientation should be directed in a way to nurture and facilitate self-determined types of motivation to enhance successful language learning.

Applying a similar process model of motivation, Alamer (2022) examined the relationship between SDT orientations and learners' competence, autonomy, and relatedness and the extent to which learners' vocabulary knowledge is influenced by these factors. The results indicated a direct relationship between the three needs and vocabulary knowledge which showed their direct significance for learning vocabulary.

However, relatively few studies have adopted an empirical approach to L2 motivation attempting to focus on the effectiveness of L2 teachers' motivational practices in satisfying learners' needs of competence, autonomy, and relatedness (Cheng & Dörnyei, 2007). Among a few studies which have adopted an empirical approach to study the effectiveness of motivational strategies or L2 teaching methods within the motivational framework three notable exceptions are Guilloteaux and Dörnyei (2008), Moskovsky et al. (2013), and Printer (2021). Guilloteaux and Dörnyei (2008) reported a strong positive relationship between motivational practices implemented by teachers and learners' motivation for learning.

Using an empirical design, Moskovsky et al. (2013) studied the impact of motivational practices used by teachers in EFL contexts. Their findings indicated that applying motivational strategies in EFL classrooms changed L2 learners' motivation significantly. They believed that the results did not merely provide correlational evidence but they indicated that teachers' motivational practices caused a strong change in EFL learners' motivated behavior.

Employing an SDT framework, Printer (2021) explored students' perceptions about a particular method of L2 teaching called Teaching Proficiency through Reading and Storytelling (TPRS). The extent to which self-determination theory's three needs of competence, autonomy, and relatedness were satisfied through this method was studied. The results suggested that foreign language learners benefited from TPRS as an engaging method that enhanced their motivation to learn. Results were in line with previous research suggesting that foreign language learners' intrinsic motivation is most likely developed through activities that are perceived as interesting, fun, and novel.

The second issue relates to the theoretical framework adopted in the studies. Many of the research studies around L2 motivation have employed theories proposed within the field of TESOL. What should be noted about these theories is that to address L2 motivation, they primarily concentrate on the internal traits of the learners as the main sources of motivation (Printer, 2021). In a meta-analysis of L2 motivation, Boo et al. (2015) called attention to the crucial role of more general psychological theories of motivation. One of the theories they reviewed in their analysis, which was considered as under-explored, is self-determination theory.

SDT proposed by Ryan and Deci (2000b) assumes that intrinsic motivation is boosted if the three needs of competence, autonomy, and relatedness are fulfilled, and motivation is diminished when frustrated. Autonomy is satisfied when there is choice, self-directed activities and learners' responsibilities for their learning. Competence refers to learners' perceptions about their capacity to succeed, and relatedness is concerned with support, a feeling of belonging and being included in the classroom

activities (Ryan & Deci, 2000). By employing teaching methods that meet SDT's three needs of competence, autonomy, and relatedness, teachers have the opportunity to reinforce learners' engagement in the classroom while directing them to intrinsically motivated behaviors (Jang et al., 2016).

However, L2 scholars have highlighted the lack of empirical research in foreign language contexts, particularly qualitative studies which examine the impact of L2 teachers' practices on their learners' motivation in different tasks (Dörnyei, 2003; Oga-Baldwin et al., 2017). In contrast to other theories of L2 motivation, SDT attaches importance to external sources as strong promoters of learner behavior (Ryan & Deci, 2000a). In other words, self-determination theory has provided a useful framework through which L2 teachers' motivational practices and learners' perceptions about them can be explored (Fried & Konza, 2013).

Therefore, adopting an SDT perspective, the following research questions were addressed in this study:

- 1) Do motivational strategies implemented in EFL classrooms have an effect on young elementary learners' basic psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness?
- 2) How do the motivational strategies implemented in EFL classrooms affect young elementary learners' basic psychological needs?

### **3. Method**

#### **3.1. Research Design**

The present study adopted an explanatory sequential mixed methods design. According to this design, the quantitative data is collected in the first phase of the study, and then the results are explained using in-depth qualitative data. In other words, the qualitative data is collected to build on the quantitative results to explain them in more detail (Creswell, 2013). Analysis of young learners' perceptions of the efficacy of motivational strategies and their impact on the three needs of competence, autonomy, and relatedness was carried out in the quantitative phase using two questionnaires. Then, in the qualitative phase, as a follow-up to the quantitative results, semi-structured interviews were conducted to explain the quantitative results from a different perspective. In this phase, students' perceptions, feelings and experiences provided qualitative evidence to capture an in-depth and comprehensive picture of learners' autonomy, competence, and relatedness.

#### **3.2. Context and Participants**

The educational context was a private language institute where English is instructed from elementary to advanced levels. For the purposes of this study, young elementary level students were selected to participate in this research. In addition, it should be considered that because of the Covid-19

pandemic, the classes were held online. The participants were 30 pre-intermediate EFL learners, both male and female who were between 8-13 years old. They were selected through purposive sampling as it provides information-rich participants and helps the researcher utilize the limited resources in the most effective way (Patton, 2002). There were 15 students in each class. The classes met three times a week for 18 sessions.

### **3.3. Instruments**

#### ***3.3.1. The Student Questionnaire on Motivational Strategies Effectiveness***

The Student Questionnaire on Motivational Strategies Effectiveness adapted from Wong (2014) was administered to both groups in order to examine young learners' perceptions of the motivational practices implemented in the class. The questionnaire comprises five sections including 28 items for measuring the teacher's application of four major motivational strategies which are creating the basic motivational condition, generating initial motivation, encouraging positive self-evaluation, and maintaining and protecting motivation. The questionnaire was translated into Persian due to the low proficiency level of the learners. An expert was asked to translate it back to English. Then it was compared with the original English version. Next, the Persian version of the scale was piloted on young learners similar to the target sample. The final version which was administered to both groups included 26 items. The reliability (Cronbach Alpha) for the Persian questionnaire was .82.

#### ***3.3.2. The Basic Psychological Need Satisfaction and Frustration Scale (BPNSFS)***

The Basic Psychological Need Satisfaction and Frustration Scale (BPNSFS) was a student rated assessment developed by Deci and Ryan (2014) which covered three basic psychological needs for internalizing motivation: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. The BPNSFS contained 24 items intended to reflect three constructs of self-determination theory including autonomy satisfaction (4 items), autonomy frustration (4 items), relatedness satisfaction (4 items), relatedness frustration (4 items), competence satisfaction (4 items), competence frustration (4 items). To avoid problems in comprehending the items of the scale, they were translated into Persian. Then two researchers were asked to translate the Persian scale back into English. The two translated English versions of the scale were compared with the Persian scale. If there were any discrepancies, items' wordings were modified. The final Persian version of the scale was piloted on learners similar to the target sample. The final version of the scale included 24 items and its reliability (Cronbach Alpha) was .86. The scale was administered to both groups at the end of the course.

### **3.3.3. Semi-Structured Interviews**

At the end of the course, students of the experimental group who had received motivational strategies as treatment were asked to participate in a semi-structured interview conducted by the teacher-researcher. The Basic Psychological Needs Scale developed by Ryan and Deci (2014) was utilized as the frame of the interview. The components contributing to the students' motivation were autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Based on the above framework, a few questions were developed and grouped under their relevant categories. Following are a few examples of the interview questions:

- Which activities did you like more in your class? Group activities or individual activities?
- Did you have a good relationship with your classmates? Teacher? Compare it with your classes before.
- Were you forced to do activities or could you choose what to do in the class?
- Did you have any stress in the class? When? Why?
- How did you feel when your errors were corrected?

All interview questions were in Persian to let participants feel relaxed and answer the questions easily.

### **3.3.4. Teacher's Reflective Journals**

Teacher's reflective journals were used as the other instrument to capture a more elaborate picture of the critical incidents in the classroom. The teacher recorded the classroom incidents that were particularly related to the motivational strategies implemented in the class and how L2 learners' cognition, emotion, and behavior changed in reaction to these motivational practices.

## **3.4. Data Collection Procedure**

Data of the present study were collected in the duration of six weeks. The same teacher instructed both groups. The researcher was the teacher of both classes. The control group students were instructed based on the regular curriculum advised by the institute. It was primarily a teacher-centered class in which students followed the teacher's lead in instruction and practice though students had the permission to ask questions. The teacher acted as the authority in the classroom making all the decisions about the materials, activities and types of instruction while the students were not given the freedom to be engaged in decisions regarding the content and activities implemented in the classroom. In contrast, in the experimental group, four motivational strategies were implemented throughout the course. These strategies were: creating the basic motivational conditions, generating initial

motivation, maintaining and protecting motivation, and encouraging positive self-evaluation. It was a student-centered class where students were engaged in classroom activities.

The teacher implemented motivational strategies and related activities in the experimental group. During this stage, the teacher was supposed to write weekly reflective journals, keeping record of the critical incidents in her classroom concerning learners' responses to the application of motivational strategies and their English vocabulary learning experiences.

Subsequently, all the participants filled out two questionnaires: The Student Questionnaire on Motivational Strategies Effectiveness and The Basic Psychological Need Satisfaction and Frustration Scale. Ultimately, to investigate the impact of motivational strategies on learners' basic psychological needs, semi-structured interviews were conducted with those 12 students in the experimental group who were willing to participate. The participants of the qualitative phase were chosen through convenience sampling, and the interviews lasted around 30 minutes for each respondent. Obtaining students' consent, all the interviews were audio recorded.

The researchers were extremely cautious about treating the participants according to ethical codes and principles set forth by the APA. Taking part in the research was voluntary, and through the supervisor of the institute, permission was obtained from the parents of all the young learners in both classes. All the participants were ensured that their anonymity would be maintained and the acquired information would be kept confidential. Before the recording of the interviews, the participants were informed.

### **3.5. Data Analysis**

Data from BPNSFS and Student Questionnaire on Motivational Strategies Effectiveness were analyzed using SPSS (version 20.0). Learners' autonomy, competence, and relatedness were analyzed, through using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis as it does not begin with predefined categories and allows categories to emerge from the data (Ezzy, 2002).

To do so, verbatim transcription of the interviews was conducted first. In this step, two authors were randomly given some interviews to transcribe. Then, to check if the transcriptions reflected the recorded interview audio files, research team member-check was conducted. It should be noted that the authors also wrote analytical memos as they were transcribing. The analytical memos written along with the transcription provided "tentative ideas for codes, topics, and noticeable patterns or themes (Saldana, 2012, p. 21). Next, the transcripts were translated back into English and translations were checked against the transcripts in the following meeting. Following the translation, open coding was conducted independently by two authors. Documenting the instances where young learners' autonomy, competence, and relatedness were observable was the

guiding principle at this phase. After the initial coding cycle, a meeting was held to share the outcome and discuss any discrepancies. Then, axial coding was conducted independently to arrive at clusters of codes and develop themes into different categories. After completing both phases of coding, the results were shared and discussed in the following meeting.

Data analysis showed three themes emerging from the data: control and choice, optimal challenge in learning tasks, and a sense of attachment to the teacher and peers. Inter-coder agreement was obtained through the multiple rounds of analysis which showed the consistency in the coding procedure. Guided by Merriam and Tisdell (2015), to ensure the trustworthiness and credibility of the data peer examination and triangulation were used. Triangulation was achieved by using multiple investigators and methods of data collection (quantitative and qualitative) and peer examination was done by discussing “the process of study, the congruency of emerging findings with the raw data, and tentative interpretations” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015, p. 259) with other researchers who were expert in this line of inquiry.

## 4. Results and Discussion

### 4.1. Results

In order to examine if motivational strategies had an effect on young learners' basic psychological needs both descriptive and inferential statistics were used. Table 1 shows the mean and standard deviation of the motivational strategies and basic psychological needs for both groups.

**Table 1**  
*Descriptive Statistics of BPN and Motivational Strategies*

Participant	EXG		CG		Total		
	Mean	Std. Deviation	Mean	Std. Deviation	Mean	N	Std. Deviation
Basic Psychological Needs	2.9861	.64337	2.930	.26260	2.9635	24	.48112
Motivational Strategies	4.9233	.18874	4.6631	.27831	4.8400	25	.24846

Further analyses were run to observe the effect of motivational strategies on basic psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness using One-way ANOVA (See Table 2).

**Table 2***Results of One-way ANOVA for Means Differences between Three BPN Sub-factors*

		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Autonomy	Between Groups	15.163	15	1.011	.878	.599
	Within Groups	16.121	14	1.151		
	Total	31.284	29			
Relatedness	Between Groups	11.131	15	.742	.916	.567
	Within Groups	11.340	14	.810		
	Total	22.470	29			
Competence	Between Groups	19.692	15	1.313	.836	.634
	Within Groups	21.983	14	1.570		
	Total	41.675	29			

The overall finding is that motivational strategies had a significant effect on *overall* basic psychological needs for the experimental group. With regard to the three components of basic psychological needs, namely competence, autonomy, and relatedness, the results are as follows:

As for the impact of motivational strategies on young learners' competence, there was a statistically significant impact of motivational strategies on competence:  $F_{(6,16)} = 4.85$ ; partial  $\eta^2 = 0.557$ . This shows that 55% of the variance in learners' competence is accounted for by motivational strategies as perceived by them.

Regarding young learners' autonomy, a statistically significant impact of motivational strategies was observed:  $F_{(6,16)} = 4.20$ ; partial  $\eta^2 = 0.508$ . This shows that almost 51% of the variance in learners' autonomy is accounted for by motivational strategies as perceived by them.

Furthermore, there was a statistically significant impact of motivational strategies on relatedness as another main sub—factor of basic psychological needs:  $F_{(6,16)} = 1.41$ ; partial  $\eta^2 = 0.404$ . This shows that 41% of the variance in learners' relatedness is accounted for by motivational strategies.

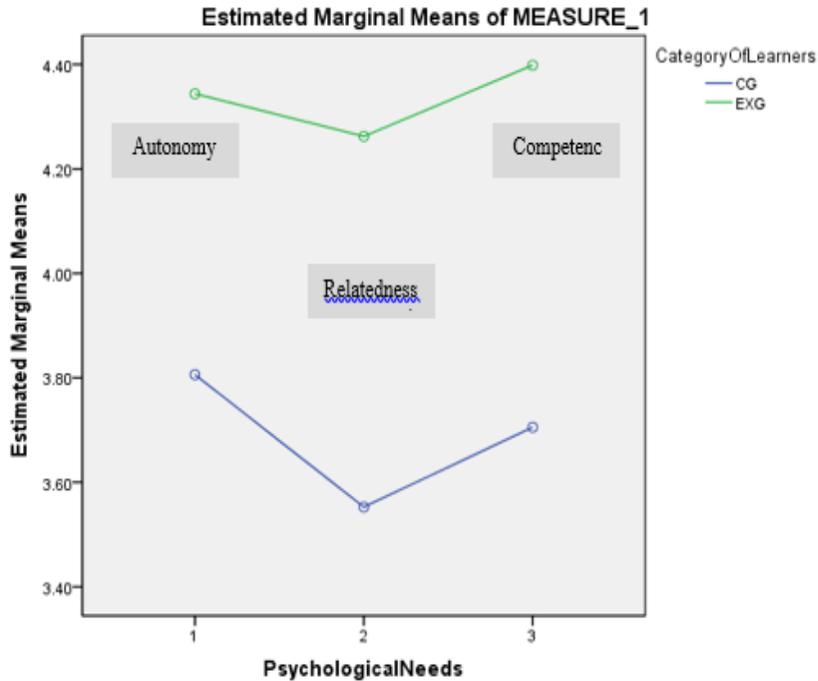
**Table 3**

*Means of Motivational Strategies and BPN by EXG and CG with Three Different Levels of BPN*

Groups		Motivational Strategies	Basic Psychological Needs	Autonomy	Relatedness	Competence
EXG	Mean	4.6329	4.3349	4.3439	4.2623	4.3984
	Std. Deviation	.66950	.61471	.74229	.48207	.76270
CG	Mean	4.7242	3.6881	3.8061	3.5527	3.7054
	Std. Deviation	.31084	1.20693	1.26671	1.08218	1.50289
Total	Mean	4.6755	4.0330	4.0929	3.9312	4.0750
	N	30	30	30	30	30
	Std. Deviation	.52660	.97784	1.03863	.88024	1.19878

As the Table 3 shows, the means for BSN levels, namely, Autonomy, Relatedness and Competence in the Experimental Group are 4.3, 4.2, and 4.3 respectively. All in all, it can be concluded that there is not any statistically significant difference among the three components of basic psychological needs; however, as mentioned before, motivational strategies had a statistically significant effect on *overall* level of basic psychological needs for the experimental group.

Diagram1

*Estimated Marginal Means vs. Psychological Needs*

As shown in diagram 1, the means of competence and autonomy were higher than relatedness, meaning that these two components of SDT were more influenced by the motivational strategies implemented by the teacher.

#### 4.1.1. Students' Perceived Autonomy, Competence, and Relatedness

The impact of motivational strategies implemented in the classroom on different components of young learners' three needs of competence, autonomy, and relatedness was confirmed using quantitative data analysis. However, the process through which these components are positively influenced by the four motivational strategies implemented by the teacher was explored using thematic analysis. SDT functions as the theoretical framework for analyzing the data.

**4.1.1.1. Control and Choice: A Key Component of Learner autonomy.** Almost all learners expressed their desire to make choices about their own learning. The sub-themes extracted from this theme were:

expressing their opinions, having a choice in the content of what they learned, and suggesting an activity of their own.

**4.1.1.1.1. Freedom to Express Their Opinions.** The majority of learners believed that one of the crucial factors which helped them to enjoy the class more than their previous English classes was their freedom to express their opinions about the class. For example, when student 2 (S2) was asked whether they experienced freedom of choice in their class expressed: “the teacher behaved in a way that we felt we were making some of the decisions in the class”. Similar responses were recorded from other students including S5, S7, and S11 who also added that the experience in this class seemed new to them and their previous English teachers did not have the same approach.

Comparing this experience with the English classes they used to attend, S4 said that “in the previous terms the teacher did not care for what we said and followed her own syllabus”. However, S6 and S8 explained that they had attended classes in which the teachers tried to give partial freedom of choice to learners before but the experience with this class was unique. This unique experience was described by S9 as a class where “the teacher would listen to us” or as S10 puts it “the teacher would give us the right to express our ideas”.

The same picture is described by the teacher in her reflections when she puts emphasis on a democratic approach to the teaching. Adopting this approach, the teacher states that learners were constantly encouraged to express what they thought about a particular activity or whether they enjoyed the tasks they performed. They were also asked to communicate with the teacher about whether and how their assigned homework helped them learn the material instructed in the class.

**4.1.1.1.2. Having a Choice in the Content of What They Learned.** Having experienced a system of education in which teachers were the authority and made all the decisions in the class, including the content of instruction, almost all learners displayed satisfaction when they were given options to choose. The majority of learners mentioned that their freedom to choose a particular activity in the class played a significant role in their motivation to learn.

S2 believed that they felt they were part of the teacher’s decisions about the activities used in the class as she constantly asked how they felt about each activity. Similarly, S4 and S6 expressed that giving them options in the class made them feel in control of their own learning. Even if learners did not have absolute control over the content of the class, they were happy that they had choice in the process and sequence of learning activities.

One of the reasons S8, S9 and S12 mentioned for their engagement in the tasks assigned during the class was the fact that these tasks were related to their interests. Other learners also highlighted the importance of listening to the students' voices by asking about the topics they were interested in. S3 explained how the freedom of choosing the relevant task "improved learners' concentration and learning" in the class.

Teacher's reflective journals also confirmed a democratic approach where learners were not forced to do the tasks. In other words, by adopting a learner-centered perspective, the teacher tried to create an atmosphere in which learners were only guided to choose the most practical and relevant tasks. She believed her main role as a teacher was "acting as a facilitator" helping learners decide based on their own preferences. This role, which was performed along with verbal and nonverbal encouragement of the learners, was embraced by the teacher throughout the class.

**4.1.1.1.3. Suggesting an Activity of Their Own.** Another theme, which was extracted from the teacher's reflection and the voices of the students during the interview, was asking learners to suggest a creative activity of their own. The teacher asked learners to think and suggest a creative activity that they liked to do from week three. This then became a routine part of every session onward. At first learners were not ready for their new role; however, toward the end of the course, they provided creative and practical suggestions. For example, at week five one student suggested a group activity in which students were supposed to "unscramble a list of words." The teacher and other students accepted the suggestion.

Offering useful and relevant tasks by students can be considered as one of the highest levels of learner autonomy, which was partially attained by some of the young learners during this course. If the English class is going to be an environment in which young learners acquire autonomy as they are learning the language, they need to develop it in a gradual but steady manner. The example of this course confirms that if learners are given freedom in a controlled way while being monitored by the teacher, they develop the capacity to take responsibility and make appropriate decisions for their own learning. This, in the long run, will lead them to become autonomous and independent learners.

**4.1.1.2. Optimal Challenge in Learning Tasks: Enhancing Learners' Perceived Competence.** Competence is defined in terms of a learner's sense of accomplishment. This is related to learners' perceived competence or how effective they feel they are in a particular task. Learners at the end of the course reported a high level of competence due to the optimal challenge they encountered in learning tasks which, in turn, was a

result of three major factors: The Balanced Load of Tasks and Assignments inside and outside the classroom, the positive verbal feedback received from the teacher, and the support provided by the teacher during the tasks.

**4.1.1.2.1. *Balanced Load of Assignment.*** One of the concerns of learners in every classroom is the load of assignments which they are supposed to work on because they are being evaluated in terms of how well they can complete the assignments. The majority of learners at the end of this course believed that the load of assignments they were asked to do was reasonable. S1 and S2 mentioned that the activities and assignments were not too much. S4 also referred to “the sufficient amount of homework.” S6, S8, and S12 stated that one reason they did not get disappointed in the course was that the exercises and assignments were manageable. In other word, learners felt confident during the course because they could overcome the challenges they faced in their learning.

**4.1.1.2.2. *Positive Feedback.*** Self-determination theory posits that positive performance feedback reinforces learners’ perceived competence and, in turn, facilitates their intrinsic motivation. Teacher’s reflective journals and students’ comments in the interviews were filled with instances of teacher giving verbal and nonverbal positive feedback. The teacher stated “giving students verbal encouragement was an essential part of the class”. She believed this would help learners “feel more confident about their abilities” and therefore “become more engaged in the classroom activities”. Students also reported receiving positive feedback of various forms. As an example, S6 referred to “the teacher giving us bonus points” or as S7 and S10 mentioned the teacher was encouraging them even when they made mistakes. S1, S2, and S9 believed that they felt good about their abilities because the teacher was always telling them they could succeed.

**4.1.1.2.3. *Scaffolding.*** In order to keep students away from a sense of disappointment when they are encountered with the challenges of learning the teacher needs to provide support through instructional scaffolding. In fact, scaffolding allows students to build confidence about their capabilities and helps them overcome more difficult tasks. Scaffolding can help motivate students to succeed. The teacher in this course made an attempt to familiarize students with the process of English learning and the challenges which are an inevitable part of language learning. In her reflections she writes that:

When the students made mistakes, I would explain to them that making mistakes is a natural process of language learning and they did not need to get disappointed. I would encourage them to try again, and I was there to help and support them through this challenge.

The teacher tried to provide informational feedback to help them accomplish in a task that they might not be able to do without the support. This, in turn, would enhance learners' perceived competence.

**4.1.1.3. A Sense of Attachment to the Teacher and Peers: Relatedness.** The need for relatedness or the sense of belonging to significant others such as teachers and peers was emphasized by young learners in their interviews. In fact, both learners and the teacher highlighted the importance of interaction with other members of the class. The type and nature of learners' interaction with their teacher and other classmates are very significant in determining their level of satisfaction or dissatisfaction. In other words, if they feel they are connected with others, they are more willing and motivated to participate in activities and as a result enjoy learning.

**4.1.1.3.1. Attachment to the Peers.** The majority of young learners in this study preferred paired-work and group work over individual tasks. The reason for their inclination towards these activities was that they felt more connected and closer with their peers through paired-work and group work. For example, S1 believed she was "more comfortable in a group". S3, S4 and S9 referred to cooperation with group members as the significant element in task achievement.

In a similar way, S6 and S11 showed less motivation in individual and competitive activities as they lose the help and support of their friends in accomplishing the tasks. S8, however, expressed a different idea about group work which is attributed to the online format of the class. She said that she did not find "group activities in an online class" helpful because it was difficult to interact effectively and cooperate with others; however, she still would prefer group work over individual task in a face-to-face class.

The teacher's reflections also reflect the effort she made to set the appropriate condition for group activities. For instance, she asked learners to form groups of both girls and boys. Learners' unwillingness to cooperate with new members is obvious at the initial stages but as they move on, they learn to work with each other to achieve the group's common goal.

**4.1.1.3.2. Attachment to the Teacher.** Creating a sense of belonging to the class is accomplished by a friendly environment which is provided by the teacher. This was practiced by the teacher during the course and has been repeatedly highlighted in her reflections. This was achieved through the teacher's "sense of humor while teaching", "keeping a close and intimate relationship with them", trying "to listen patiently to what they had to say", "verbally encouraging them by highlighting their strengths", and "avoid embarrassing learners".

The same concepts were reported by the learners. Almost all learners referred to the friendly atmosphere of the class. For instance, S3 mentioned how “comfortable the learners felt” about the class. S10 and S12 believed that they were not under any pressure. S4, S7 and S9 compared the relaxing atmosphere of the class to their previous learning experience, which in some cases were filled with anxiety. Similarly, S2 mentioned that receiving encouragement from the teacher was significant in leading the students to participated in group activities.

The majority of learners were happy with the teacher’s patience, particularly when they were making mistakes. They didn’t report being embarrassed because of their mistakes. What should be taken into consideration is that they all attributed this comfortable environment to the role of the teacher.

## **4.2. Discussion**

The results of the study align self-determination theory’s theoretical position that learners’ enhanced freedom of choice, perceived ability, and the sense of belonging to their teacher and classmates are positively associated with more self-determined forms of motivation. In other words, in a context in which learners are not given choice regarding their learning processes, they may experience an absence of self-confidence and self-determination. When they feel they do not have any control over the content and process of their learning, they will feel helpless and demotivated toward the learning situation. In addition, the findings of this study support Littlewood’s (1999) viewpoint about the necessity of distinguishing L2 learners in eastern educational cultures as they tend to exhibit higher levels of autonomy after the direction of activities has been decided by themselves.

Considering the findings of the study on control and choice, it can be inferred that autonomy has more to do with the pursuit of choices important to the individual, and the fact that the choices set by themselves or others do not play a vital role (Reeve & Shin, 2020; Rudy et al., 2007). Drawing on self-determination theory, learners can feel intrinsically motivated if they internalize external factors which can help them regulate their behavior such as choices made by others into the self (Ryan & Deci, 2006; Safdari, 2018).

Furthermore, this study is consistent with the findings of Niemiec and Ryan (2009) who claim that when activities and teachers are perceived as fulfilling the learners’ competence, autonomy, and relatedness, an ideal environment for learners’ intrinsic motivation is created. The interconnection between self-determination theory’s basic psychological needs which is reported in the literature (Jiang & Zhang, 2021; Muñoz & Ramirez, 2015) is also observed in this study.

Young learners reported that their freedom of choice provided the ground for them to feel competent and as a result increased their sense of relatedness. For instance, the creative tasks which students suggested for the class met the three needs of SDT and, therefore, it can be stated that each of the needs positively influenced the others. For instance, the autonomy which was provided by these tasks triggered learner control over the process of their learning; on the other hand, it increased their competence because they felt that their own ideas were chosen and practiced in the class. Working on the paired and group activities promoted their cohesion and a sense of belonging to their teacher and classmates which satisfied the three basic needs of SDT (Printer, 2021).

Furthermore, the findings indicated the positive impact of choice on young learners' engagement in classroom activities, thus supporting the theoretical relationship between learners' choice and their cognitive engagement (Nakamura et al., 2021; Ryan & Deci, 2000a). This positive impact can be explained in terms of the role of choice in different tasks. In other words, young learners' willingness to accomplish the task and their continued motivation to improve their work increased their task engagement (Lambert et al., 2017). Learners' freedom of choice as a form of autonomy results in a perceived sense of control over their learning which can be considered as one of the basic psychological needs which determines learners' level of task engagement (Mercer, 2019).

Moreover, the findings show the positive effect of encouraging feedback on young learners in an EFL context. Different sources of feedback such as the feedback from the teacher and peers, can support learners' autonomy and encourage their engagement in the tasks. This, in turn, enhances the interactions between teacher and students and as well as student-student interactions as L2 learners' need for competence is satisfied through these sources (Tian & Zhou, 2020).

In line with previous studies, the results of this study indicated that young L2 learners who were working together in the cooperative group activities experienced greater levels of perceived relatedness which in turn enhanced their task motivation. The results of this study are also consistent with Muñoz and Ramirez's (2015) view that teachers' success in fostering motivation depends, largely, on relatedness, that is without strong relationships between teachers and students, even the best motivational practices do not result in intrinsic motivation.

## **5. Conclusion**

The current study employed a mixed-methods approach to explore self-determination theory's three needs of competence, autonomy, and relatedness from young learners' viewpoint. The findings indicated that young learners' increased perception of autonomy was impacted by the freedom of choice they were granted through classroom activities. Similarly, their competence was increased as the tasks they performed provided an optimal challenge through which they received positive feedback. Furthermore, working on the tasks in groups enhanced young learners' cohesion and their sense of belonging and connectedness to the teacher and their classmates.

Despite the fact that self-determined motivation is a process that is individually accomplished, the findings of the study support that the development of this motivation also depends on social environments that are supportive. There is no doubt that such environments could primarily be created by the teachers.

The overall findings of this study suggest that although young learners may have the same level of motivation toward learning English, the type of task and the context in which tasks are introduced determine their performance to a large extent. Consequently, classroom activities that are designed for young learners can boost their motivation in different pedagogical settings by incorporating motivational strategies.

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