

PROMOTING MOTIVATION IN LANGUAGE LEARNING WITH NATIVE-SPEAKING ENGLISH TEACHERS: UNHEARD VOICES OF EFL STUDENTS

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Abstract. This study investigates Vietnamese EFL learners' perceptions of their motivation when learning with native English-speaking teachers (NETs) at a public university in the Mekong Delta, Vietnam, focusing on the perceived impact of NETs and learners' suggestions for enhancing motivational engagement. Data were collected from 88 English learners through questionnaires and 5 semi-structured interviews. The findings indicate a generally high level of agreement among participants regarding ten proposed motivational characteristics of NETs, with the most influential being: (1) modeling appropriate behavior, (2) creating a pleasant and relaxed classroom atmosphere, and (3) establishing positive teacher–learner relationships. However, the study also highlights areas for improvement, notably the need for NETs to enhance (1) task presentation, (2) support for learner goal-setting, and (3) promotion of learner autonomy. The study concludes with practical recommendations for NETs and educational stakeholders to more effectively foster motivation among EFL learners.

Keywords: motivation, native-speaking English teachers, perceptions, teacher characteristics, teacher roles.

1. Introduction

In an increasingly globalized world, English is a vital tool for diplomacy, higher education, and employment opportunities [1], [2]. In Vietnam, it is a compulsory subject across all education levels and part of the national university entrance exam [3]. Given its importance, improving English teaching and learning is both an immediate and long-term priority.

Raising language learning standards requires a clear understanding of the factors that influence success [4, 5]. Among these, motivation is widely recognized as a key factor. As Gilakjani, Leong, and Sabouri emphasize, “Without student motivation, there is no pulse, there is no life in the class” (p. 9) [6]. This remark is particularly relevant in the Vietnamese context, where Nguyen (2019) found that low motivation remains a significant barrier to successful language acquisition, despite years of instruction [7]. When language learners are motivated, they actively find ways to improve [8]. Motivation, however, is not static; rather, it is shaped by a complex interplay of factors, including previous experiences, family, peers, culture, learning environment, and, perhaps most crucially, the role of teachers [9].

Teachers are central to motivating learners [10, 11]. Teachers are not merely deliverers of content; they also serve as motivators who play a vital role in fostering students' involvement and

success in language learning through actions such as offering encouragement, building trust, selecting engaging tasks, demonstrating enthusiasm, sharing personal experiences, and providing constructive feedback. These practices contribute to the creation of supportive classroom environments, which are strongly associated with improved language learning outcomes [12, 13]. Supportive classrooms lead to better second language outcomes [14].

Although research has explored how teachers influence motivation, few studies have focused specifically on native-speaking English teachers (NETs). This study addresses that gap by examining Vietnamese EFL learners' perceptions of how NETs affect their motivation. To this end, the study is guided by the following research questions:

I. To what extent do Vietnamese EFL learners perceive NETs as influencing their motivation in language learning?

II. What suggestions do learners offer for enhancing motivation in classrooms with NETs?

2. Content

2.1. Literature review

2.1.1. Definition of motivation

Motivation in language learning is an abstract cognitive process that unfolds throughout the learning period. It functions both as a dependent variable, shaped by external factors, and as a mediator influencing learning outcomes. Cook and Artino Jr. have defined it as the process by which goal-directed actions are initiated and sustained [15]. In language learning, motivation is driven by learners' perceptions of their social environment and propels them toward strategic, sustained engagement [16]. Dörnyei describes it as a dynamic process that initiates, directs, and regulates actions by transforming initial desires into concrete learning efforts [17, 18].

2.1.2. Characteristics of native-speaking English teachers

NETs are distinguished by their advanced language proficiency, intuitive understanding of linguistic nuances, and the ability to integrate cultural insights into language instruction [19]. In fact, their exposure to authentic language use from an early age allows them to model natural pronunciation, rhythm, and discourse patterns, features that can be particularly beneficial for EFL learners aiming to develop communicative competence. This background also enables them to recognize and address subtle language gaps, such as issues with vocabulary comprehension and usage in reading tasks, thereby supporting learners in developing a more accurate and nuanced understanding of English [20].

However, NETs may face challenges related to learners' first-language (L1) interference. As Ma and Ping (2021) noted, students often struggle to articulate or clarify issues stemming from L1 influence, making it difficult for NETs to address these effectively [21]. Additionally, Davies emphasized that competencies such as grammatical intuition and communicative ability are not innate, but rather developed through learners' experiences and shaped by their specific educational contexts [22].

2.1.3. Approaches to generating learners' motivation in language learning

One approach to fostering learner motivation involves the use of professional instructional strategies. Teachers' ability to build and maintain learner motivation is central to teaching effectiveness [23]. Rost proposes a three-layer model to guide EFL teachers in motivating students [24]. The first layer, *Finding Your Passion*, involves connecting language learning to students' interests. When learners see English as relevant to their goals, motivation improves. The second layer, *Changing Your Reality*, encourages teachers to frame learning as manageable by breaking it into clear, self-directed steps. This helps learners feel in control and see progress. The

third layer, *Connecting to Learning Activities*, promotes engagement by activating learners' intention, attention, and memory through stimulating activities.

Beyond strategy, classroom atmosphere plays a major role in motivation [25]. A positive, inclusive environment fosters belonging and encourages perseverance [26]. The teacher-student relationship is also vital. Like parents, teachers can deeply influence learners' motivation. Many students are driven by the desire to meet the expectations of those they respect, including teachers [27, 28]. Supportive, respectful relationships make learners more emotionally and cognitively invested in their studies. Together, these strategies and environmental factors show that motivation is not fixed. It can be nurtured through intentional teaching practices and meaningful teacher-student connections.

2.1.4. A framework of motivational strategies in language learning

This study adopts Dörnyei and Csizér's (1998) ten macro-strategies for motivating language learners as its theoretical framework [27]. These strategies can be grouped into three categories: teacher behavior and classroom climate, instructional design, and learner empowerment. First, strategies such as showing enthusiasm, creating a relaxed atmosphere, and building strong teacher-student relationships emphasize the importance of a supportive and engaging classroom environment. Second, strategies involving clear and appropriately challenging tasks, the use of engaging materials, personalization of content, and integration of cultural elements focus on designing meaningful and stimulating learning experiences. Third, strategies that boost learners' self-confidence, encourage autonomy, and promote goal setting aim to empower students and strengthen their intrinsic motivation. Together, these strategies address the emotional, cognitive, and social aspects of motivation, providing a comprehensive framework for sustaining student engagement in language learning.

It is noted that these macro-strategies were developed based on data collected from practicing language teachers and offer a comprehensive set of practical principles aimed at enhancing motivation in the language classroom [29]. The framework is, therefore, well-suited for this study as it reflects a socio-educational understanding of motivation that aligns with real-world teaching contexts, especially in EFL environments.

2.2. Method

2.2.1. Research design

This study employed a mixed-methods research design to comprehensively investigate Vietnamese EFL learners' perceptions of motivation when learning with NETs. The mixed-methods approach was selected to provide a more nuanced understanding of how NETs influence learner motivation, combining the statistical strength of quantitative data with the contextual depth of qualitative insights [30].

2.2.2. Research participants

A total of 88 English learners from a university in the Mekong Delta, Vietnam, participated in this study. The sample included 34 learners in the English Teacher Education program and 54 in the English Studies program. Among them, 21 were male (23.9%) and 67 were female (76.1%), with ages ranging from 20 to 21. All participants had studied English for at least nine years. Notably, each participant had completed a minimum of two semesters of instruction with NETs during their university studies.

2.2.3. Research instruments

2.2.3.1. Questionnaire

Questionnaires are recognized as a practical and efficient method for collecting data from large and diverse sample populations. This method not only facilitates broad data collection but

also upholds ethical considerations, ensuring participants' anonymity and confidentiality, thereby enhancing the validity of the study [31].

The questionnaire consisted of 31 items adapted from Cheng and Dörnyei's instrument [32], presented in both English and Vietnamese to ensure clarity. A native English teacher reviewed the English version for accuracy, while the Vietnamese translation minimized potential misunderstandings. The questionnaire had two sections. The first section collected demographic data (name, age, gender, student code, email, and phone number), and the second included 31 Likert-scale items measuring learners' perceptions of NETs' impact on motivation. These items were rated from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) and grouped into ten clusters aligned with specific motivational strategies.

2.2.3.2. Interviews

Interviews were conducted to collect qualitative data on learners' suggestions for enhancing motivation when engaging with NETs [33]. Specifically, participants were asked a single open-ended question, that was "What are your suggestions for enhancing motivation in learning engagement with NETs?". This format encouraged participants to respond freely, allowing for rich, detailed insights into their perspectives.

2.2.4. Data collection procedures

The data collection process consisted of three phases: piloting the questionnaire, administering the official questionnaire, and conducting interviews.

First, the questionnaire underwent a content validity check by two experts holding PhDs in the field of TESOL. It was then piloted with 42 students who were not part of the main study but shared similar characteristics with the target participants. The pilot produced a high Cronbach's alpha ($\alpha=0.95$), confirming reliability. In the second phase, the finalized questionnaire was administered to 88 learners. Approval was obtained via formal emails to lecturers. The researcher met participants to explain the study, gain informed consent, and provide clear instructions. All 88 paper questionnaires were completed and collected, with an overall Cronbach's alpha of 0.91, indicating strong internal consistency. Specifically, the Cronbach's alpha coefficients for each of the ten subscales were as follows: Making language classes interesting ($\alpha=0.93$); Setting a personal example with one's own behavior ($\alpha=0.92$); Developing a good relationship with learners ($\alpha=0.92$); Increasing learners' goal-orientedness ($\alpha=0.92$); Familiarizing learners with the target language culture ($\alpha=0.92$); Creating a pleasant, relaxed classroom atmosphere ($\alpha=0.91$); Increasing learners' linguistic self-confidence ($\alpha=0.91$); Presenting tasks properly ($\alpha=0.90$); Promoting learner autonomy ($\alpha=0.89$); and Personalizing the learning process ($\alpha=0.88$).

In the final phase, qualitative data were collected through interviews with 5 randomly selected participants. Before each interview, participants were reminded of the ten NET-related properties to ensure their responses would be relevant. A single open-ended question was used to explore suggestions for enhancing learner motivation with NETs. Interviews were audio recorded, with detailed notes taken for subsequent analysis.

2.2.5. Data analysis

The study employed both quantitative and qualitative methods of data analysis. Quantitative data from the questionnaires were analyzed descriptively using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences, version 20, to explore learners' perceptions of the role of NETs in enhancing learning motivation. Regarding qualitative data focusing on learners' suggestions for improving motivation and engagement with NETs, they were analyzed using thematic analysis [34]. This method involves: (1) familiarization with the data through repeated reading to gain a comprehensive understanding; (2) generating initial codes by systematically identifying and labeling significant features of the data; (3) searching for themes by organizing codes into broader patterns of meaning; (4) reviewing themes to ensure they accurately represent the data and refining them as needed; (5) defining and naming themes by clearly articulating the essence of

each theme and its relevance to the research questions; and (6) producing the report, which involves selecting compelling examples, conducting a final analysis of the themes, and relating the findings back to the research aims and existing literature.

2.3. Results and discussions

2.3.1. Vietnamese EFL learners perceived the properties of NETs as influencing their motivation in language learning

Quantitative data from descriptive statistics revealed that Vietnamese EFL learners generally perceived NETs as having a positive influence on their motivation to learn English ($M=3.87$), indicating a fairly strong level of agreement.

Among the ten motivational characteristics assessed, the highest-rated was NETs' ability to model appropriate behavior ($M=4.27$). Learners reported being particularly motivated by teachers who demonstrated enthusiasm for teaching and a positive attitude toward learning. This aligns with Dörnyei and Kubanyiova [35] and Matsumoto [36], emphasizing the motivational value of teachers serving as role models through their conduct and attitude.

The second highest-rated characteristic was NETs' creation of a pleasant and relaxed classroom atmosphere ($M=4.05$). Previous studies (e.g., [37-39]) support this finding, indicating that a low-anxiety environment enhances learner motivation. This may be particularly relevant in the Vietnamese context, where learners are often described as passive [40], and thus may respond more positively to the engaging classroom dynamics that NETs often bring.

The third characteristic, positive teacher-learner relationships ($M=3.92$), was also viewed as a strong source of motivation. Learners reported feeling encouraged by the friendliness and cultural sensitivity demonstrated by NETs. These findings are consistent with studies by Dörnyei and Csizér [27] and Papi and Hiver [28], which highlight the importance of strong interpersonal relationships in fostering motivation in language learning.

Cultural exposure was another influential aspect ($M=3.90$). Learners valued the opportunity to become familiar with the target language culture through interactions with NETs. This is particularly relevant in Vietnam, where exposure to authentic English-speaking contexts is limited [41]. Since most language input occurs in Vietnamese through sources such as family, media, and formal schooling, NETs provide a rare and valuable cultural link.

Learners also responded positively to NETs' ability to make language classes interesting ($M=3.86$). They appreciated the variety and creativity in lesson delivery, including the encouragement of personal expression. This aligns with findings by Jieyin and Gajasen [39]. A possible explanation is that local teachers may be less likely to modify textbook-based tasks due to time constraints or reluctance to deviate from set materials, making NETs' adaptive teaching style more engaging by contrast.

The role of NETs in boosting learners' linguistic self-confidence ($M=3.81$) was also rated favorably. This may be linked to their preference for communicative approaches over grammar-focused instruction, which remains dominant among local teachers ([42]). By prioritizing fluency and interaction over grammatical accuracy, NETs may reduce learners' anxiety and enhance motivation, especially in speaking tasks.

However, some characteristics received relatively lower mean scores. For example, task presentation ($M=3.78$) was perceived as less motivational. This may stem from language barriers, ambiguous instructions, or the perceived difficulty of tasks [43], which can hinder learners' understanding and reduce engagement.

Similarly, the characteristic of increasing learners' goal-orientedness ($M=3.73$) showed a moderate level of agreement. Vietnamese learners may lack clearly defined language learning

goals; however, NETs' modeling of mastery-oriented learning behavior [44] can provide direction and stimulate motivation.

Finally, personalizing the learning process ($M=3.69$) and promoting learner autonomy ($M=3.66$) were also rated positively, though not as highly as other factors. This may reflect a transitional stage for learners who are accustomed to teacher-centered instruction [45]. The learner-centered strategies employed by NETs, which grant students more control and decision-making power, have the potential to gradually reshape learner attitudes and increase intrinsic motivation.

2.3.2. Learners' suggestions for enhancing motivation in engagement with NETs

Qualitative interview data revealed that learners strongly acknowledged the important role of NETs in promoting motivation. Three key suggestions emerged from the interviews for improving motivational engagement including (1) increasing learners' goal-orientedness, (2) promoting learner autonomy, and (3) improving the presentation of tasks.

2.3.2.1. Increasing goal-orientedness

The findings indicate that more than half of the participants ($n = 3$ out of 5) emphasized the need for NETs to help learners clarify their goals and understand the value of learning English. Learners suggested that motivation could be enhanced if NETs took time to explore students' expectations and emphasize the personal relevance of the course. For instance, Participant 1 shared: "In my opinion, it would be better if the NETs helped me understand the reason why I should enroll in the course and see the significance of it in a deep insight." Sharing the same view, Participant 3 expressed: "I hope the NETs spend more time with students talking about the benefits of this language as well as consolidating our beliefs about it instead of just keeping teaching academic stuff." Likewise, Participant 4 said: "I think the NETs should give us a chance to raise our voices about what we want to achieve at the beginning of the course so then we can imagine what we need to do to achieve the goal." These responses suggest that Vietnamese learners may view English learning as compulsory rather than intrinsically meaningful. Therefore, NETs can play a pivotal role in transforming this perception by explicitly discussing the real-world benefits of English, linking course content to learners' goals and involving students in goal-setting activities [46, 47]. This reflective dialogue may help shift learners' mindset and foster a more purposeful and motivated approach to learning.

2.3.2.2. Promoting learner autonomy

some participants ($n = 2$ out of 5) proposed that NETs should give students greater control over their learning and adopt more facilitative roles. These learners expressed a desire for more choice and interactive involvement in the learning process. Participant 2, for instance, shared: "In my point of view, the NETs should give learners more choices in deciding what they are taught. For example, topics can be created by the students." Similarly, Participant 4 expressed: "I suggest that the NETs directly facilitate our learning. For instance, in listening classes, we can listen to a text spoken by the NETs, then do the exercises and check mistakes right after that instead of listening to the audios through technological devices and check transcripts." These comments indicate a preference for a shift from traditional teacher-centered practices to more learner-centered ones [48]. By encouraging learners to make decisions about content and learning strategies, NETs can empower students to take responsibility for their progress. This is particularly significant in the Vietnamese context, where learners are often conditioned by rigid, top-down instruction [45, 49]. NETs' promotion of autonomy may introduce a refreshing dynamic that not only differentiates them from local teachers but also enhances learners' sense of ownership and motivation [50].

2.3.2.3. Improving task presentation

It is interesting to note that there was one participant who emphasized the importance of clearer and more accessible task instructions. Specifically, the Participant 5 suggested that NETs

should adjust their language use when assigning tasks, particularly in the early stages of the course, stating: “I think that the NETs should use simple words when assigning tasks to learners at the beginning of the course and then they could increase the level of vocabulary gradually.” This feedback highlights a common issue in cross-cultural classrooms: linguistic and cognitive overload during instruction [51]. Learners may struggle to follow the flow of lessons if instructions are delivered in complex language or without scaffolding [52]. In this respect, two key recommendations can be drawn. First, NETs should begin with simplified instructions and gradually increase task complexity and vocabulary over time [53, 54]. Second, explanations should be practical and explicit to reduce anxiety and support comprehension [55]. This in turn can help may allow learners to feel more prepared and confident, ultimately enhancing their engagement and motivation.

3. Conclusions

This study explored Vietnamese EFL learners’ perceptions of the influence of native NETs on their language learning motivation and offered practical recommendations for enhancing motivational engagement in classrooms led by NETs.

The findings indicated that all ten NET characteristics examined had a motivational impact, albeit to varying degrees. Learners identified role modeling, creating a positive classroom atmosphere, and building rapport as motivating strengths of NETs. Based on learners’ suggestions, three key areas for improvement were identified: clearer and more structured task presentation, increased support for goal-setting, and expanded opportunities for learner autonomy. These should be reinforced through training, reflection, and institutional support. At the same time, lower ratings in task presentation, goal-setting, personalization, and autonomy highlight areas for growth. NETs are encouraged to integrate clear goals, scaffolded instruction, and learner-centered methods. Learners suggested simplifying instructions, offering more choice, and promoting reflective dialogue, practical steps for improving motivation.

Overall, NETs positively influence learner motivation, reinforcing their value in Vietnamese classrooms. In this respect, institutions should continue supporting their role to enhance authentic language exposure and foster a learning environment that supports both the cognitive and emotional aspects of language acquisition.

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