

Motivation, Classroom Engagement, and Academic Achievement in Saudi EFL Classrooms: A Mixed-Methods Mediation Analysis

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Abstract

This mixed-methods study examines factors contributing to low student motivation in EFL classrooms, the relationship between motivation and classroom engagement, and the implications for academic achievement in the Saudi Arabian context. Drawing on Self-Determination Theory (SDT) and Dörnyei's L2 Motivational Self System, the study conceptualizes motivation as a dynamic construct shaped by autonomy, competence, relatedness, and learners' future L2 selves. Data were collected from 80 EFL students and 10 teachers in Riyadh using questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and academic performance records. Quantitative findings revealed strong positive correlations between motivation, engagement, and academic achievement, with teacher support, content relevance, and learner autonomy emerging as significant predictors of engagement. Mediation analysis indicated that classroom engagement partially mediates the relationship between motivation and academic performance. Qualitative findings highlighted contextual challenges, including exam-driven instruction and restricted learner autonomy, which constrain motivational processes. The study offers context-specific pedagogical recommendations and contributes original empirical evidence to research on motivation in Middle Eastern EFL contexts.

Keywords: Academic achievement; Classroom engagement; EFL; Saudi Arabia; Student motivation

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1. Introduction

Motivation is widely acknowledged as a central determinant of student engagement, persistence, and academic success across educational contexts. In EFL classrooms, motivation assumes particular importance due to the linguistic, cognitive, and affective demands associated with learning a non-native language. Learners in EFL contexts often face limited exposure to authentic language use, anxiety about making errors, and instructional environments that prioritize examination performance over communicative competence, all of which can undermine sustained motivation. These factors can weaken learners' motivational orientations

and, so, their engagement and achievement.

Contemporary motivational theories emphasize that motivation is not a fixed learner trait but a dynamic process shaped by psychological needs, learning experiences, and sociocultural contexts. Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000) posits that motivation flourishes when learners' needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness are satisfied, while Dörnyei's (2005) L2 Motivational Self System highlights the role of learners' future self-images in sustaining effort and persistence in language learning. Together, these frameworks provide a robust theoretical lens for examining how classroom practices and learning environments influence motivation and engagement.

Despite growing attention to learner-centered pedagogy and educational reform, low student motivation remains a persistent challenge in many EFL classrooms, particularly in exam-oriented and teacher-centered contexts such as those found in parts of the Middle East. Reduced participation, limited engagement, and unsatisfactory academic outcomes continue to be reported, suggesting a gap between motivational theory and classroom practice. However, empirical research systematically examining the mechanisms linking motivation, engagement, and academic achievement in Saudi EFL contexts remains limited.

Addressing this gap, the present study investigates the causes of low motivation among Saudi EFL learners, examines how motivation influences classroom engagement and academic performance, and explores pedagogical practices that may enhance motivational learning environments. The study objectives are to:

1. Identify contextual and pedagogical factors contributing to low student motivation in Saudi EFL classrooms.
2. Examine the structural relationships among student motivation, classroom engagement, and academic achievement.
3. Determine whether classroom engagement functions as a mediating mechanism linking motivation to academic performance.
4. Provide evidence-based pedagogical implications for enhancing motivation and participation in exam-oriented EFL contexts.

By integrating quantitative and qualitative data within established motivational frameworks, the study aims to contribute contextually grounded insights to the EFL motivation literature. By empirically examining motivational processes through both psychological and pedagogical lenses, this study seeks to bridge the gap between motivational theory and classroom practice in Saudi EFL education.

2. Literature Review

Motivation in EFL contexts has been extensively examined through theoretical and empirical lenses, with particular emphasis on its relationship to engagement and academic performance. Self-Determination Theory (SDT) (Deci & Ryan, 2000) remains one of the most influential

frameworks, proposing that learners are more likely to sustain motivation when their needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness are fulfilled. Recent research confirms that autonomy-supportive instruction, meaningful choice, and constructive feedback are associated with higher engagement and achievement (Al-Hoorie et al., 2021; Oga-Baldwin et al., 2019; Reeve, 2006).

Complementing SDT, Dörnyei's (2005) L2 Motivational Self System conceptualizes motivation as driven by learners' visions of themselves as competent future language users. Recent empirical studies show that a vivid Ideal L2 Self predicts persistence, engagement, and achievement in EFL settings (Papi & Hiver, 2020; Teimouri et al., 2022). The L2 Learning Experience component further highlights the role of immediate classroom conditions, linking instructional practices directly to motivational outcomes. In Saudi EFL classrooms, shifts toward learner-led and autonomy-supportive practices have been associated with measurable gains in engagement, confidence, and reading performance (Sharma, 2022).

Alongside motivational support, the literature shows persistent sources of demotivation in EFL classrooms. Studies in Middle Eastern contexts report that teacher-centered instruction, limited opportunities for interaction, and exam-driven curricula can undermine autonomy and engagement (Alrabai, 2020; Holbah & Sharma, 2021; Sharma, 2024). Psychological factors such as foreign language anxiety, fear of negative evaluation, and low self-efficacy also restrict participation and effort (Oteir & Al-Otaibi, 2019; Teng & Zhang, 2016). Classroom engagement is commonly conceptualized as a multidimensional construct encompassing behavioral, emotional, and cognitive components (Fredricks et al., 2004), making it a useful lens for explaining how motivation is enacted in observable learning processes.

Recent work further emphasizes that instructional environments shape how motivation translates into engagement and achievement. Technology-enhanced and learner-centered approaches such as online project-based learning and flipped classroom models have shown positive effects on motivation, participation, and academic outcomes (Al-Bahadli et al., 2023; Eltahir & Alsalhi, 2025). Within EFL classrooms, teacher praise and feedback function as motivational regulators that strengthen persistence and engagement (Peng, 2021), while supportive classroom climates characterized by teacher support and emotional safety promote communicative participation (Devi, 2024). Large-scale evidence also indicates that self-determined motivation predicts multiple dimensions of engagement, which in turn contribute to achievement outcomes (Martin, 2009; Shao et al., 2020; Teimouri et al., 2022).

Although this body of research is substantial, key gaps remain. Many studies rely on cross-sectional survey designs and do not integrate qualitative evidence that captures learners' lived experiences and contextual constraints. Moreover, Saudi EFL contexts remain underrepresented in high-impact international outlets, particularly in research that explicitly models engagement as a mediating mechanism between motivation and academic achievement. Addressing these gaps, the present study adopts a mixed-methods design and examines classroom engagement as a mediator linking motivational orientations to academic performance

within a Saudi university EFL context.

2.1 Motivation, Engagement, and Learning Environment

Recent empirical research reinforces the view that motivation and engagement work together to shape academic outcomes, with engagement functioning as a process variable that translates motivational dispositions into learning behaviors and performance (Bayoumy & Alsayed, 2021; Ito & Umemoto, 2022). Studies also show that social and instructional supports influence achievement indirectly through motivational and engagement pathways, underscoring the role of classroom environment in sustaining participation and effort (Chen et al., 2023; Shao et al., 2024).

2.2 Pedagogical Influences on Motivation

Pedagogical design plays a direct role in shaping motivational and engagement processes. Evidence from language and higher education settings indicates that learner-centered strategies, including project-based learning and flipped classroom models, support motivation, interaction, and academic achievement (Al-Bahadli et al., 2023; Eltahir & Alsalhi, 2025). In EFL contexts, teacher feedback and praise also work as motivational supports that foster engagement and persistence (Peng, 2021).

2.3 Mediating Role of Engagement

Engagement is increasingly conceptualized as a mediating mechanism linking motivation to academic achievement. Process-oriented models suggest that motivational resources influence outcomes by shaping learners' sustained participation, cognitive investment, and strategic effort, positioning engagement as the most immediate pathway through which motivation affects performance (Ito & Umemoto, 2022; Shao et al., 2024).

2.4 Critical Synthesis of Motivational Frameworks

While SDT and the L2 Motivational Self System are strongly supported in EFL research, alternative frameworks such as Expectancy–Value Theory (EVT) emphasize expectancy of success and perceived task value. However, EVT has shown mixed explanatory power in exam-oriented contexts where perceived value may not consistently translate into sustained engagement. SDT offers a more interactional and process-oriented account by emphasizing psychological need satisfaction, which is particularly relevant in language learning environments involving affective risk and social participation (Deci & Ryan, 2000). At the same time, evidence suggests that autonomy-supportive practices may be constrained or less effective in highly structured, assessment-driven settings, highlighting the importance of contextualized research. By integrating SDT and the L2 Motivational Self System, the present study addresses these theoretical tensions and models classroom engagement as the mechanism through which

motivational dispositions are translated into academic performance in Saudi EFL classrooms.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study employed a convergent mixed-methods design to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the relationships among student motivation, classroom engagement, and academic achievement. The quantitative component examined structural relationships among variables using statistical modeling, while the qualitative component explored participants' classroom experiences to provide contextual interpretation of statistical patterns. Integration occurred at the interpretation stage, allowing qualitative findings to explain mechanisms underlying quantitative relationships. The study employed mediation analysis consistent with contemporary process-oriented motivational modeling frameworks.

3.2 Research Context and Participants

Participants consisted of 80 EFL students and 10 instructors from a university-level foundation program in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. The program operates within a standardized, exam-oriented instructional framework typical of tertiary English language preparation courses in the region. Participants were recruited using convenience sampling based on accessibility and institutional approval. The student sample represented humanities-track learners enrolled in compulsory English courses. This population was selected because it reflects learners studying English within structured curriculum requirements and assessment-driven instructional environments. Although convenience sampling limits generalizability, it is appropriate for exploratory mixed-methods research aimed at identifying contextual motivational mechanisms.

3.3 Instruments

Five complementary instruments were used to ensure methodological triangulation:

1. Motivation Questionnaire- The instrument was adapted from the Academic Motivation Scale (AMS) and measures intrinsic motivation, identified regulation, and external regulation.
2. Classroom Engagement Questionnaire- Adapted from the Student Engagement Instrument (SEI), measuring behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement.
3. Semi-Structured Interviews- Conducted with students and teachers to explore perceived motivational barriers, classroom practices, and engagement experiences.
4. Structured Classroom Observations- Observation checklists were used to document instructional practices, interaction patterns, and learner participation.
5. Academic Performance Records- Course grades were used as an objective indicator of academic achievement.

3.4 Reliability and Validity

Instrument reliability was assessed using Cronbach's alpha coefficients. All questionnaire scales demonstrated acceptable internal consistency ($\alpha \geq .70$), indicating reliable measurement of motivational and engagement constructs. Content validity was ensured through adaptation from established instruments widely used in educational research. Construct validity was supported by theoretically consistent relationships among variables and convergence between quantitative and qualitative findings. Methodological triangulation across surveys, interviews, observations, and academic records enhanced overall rigor and reduced single-method bias.

3.5 Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS. Analytical procedures included:

- Descriptive statistics to summarize variable distributions.
- Pearson correlation analysis to examine relationships among variables.
- Multiple regression analysis to identify predictors of engagement.
- Mediation analysis using PROCESS Model 4 to test indirect effects.

Before conducting regression analyses, assumptions of normality, linearity, and multicollinearity were examined and found to be within acceptable ranges. Effect sizes were interpreted using established benchmarks for educational research. Qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's six-phase framework. The coding process involved familiarization with the data, generation of initial codes, theme development, review, definition, and reporting. NVivo software was used to facilitate data organization and enhance coding reliability.

3.6 Integration of Quantitative and Qualitative Data

Data integration followed a complementarity approach. Quantitative findings identified structural relationships among motivation, engagement, and achievement, while qualitative findings provided explanatory insight into contextual factors shaping these relationships. Convergence between statistical patterns and participant experiences strengthened interpretive validity and supported theory-informed conclusions.

3.7 Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained before data collection. Participants provided informed consent and were assured of confidentiality and anonymity. Participation was voluntary, and all data were used solely for research purposes.

4. Results

4.1 Quantitative Findings

Descriptive statistics indicated moderate to high levels of intrinsic motivation and classroom

engagement. Among engagement dimensions, behavioral engagement demonstrated the highest mean scores, followed by emotional and cognitive engagement. This pattern indicates consistent observable participation, although deeper cognitive investment occurred less frequently.

RQ1: Factors Contributing to Student Demotivation and Engagement

Multiple regression analysis identified teacher support ($\beta = .41, p < .001$), learner autonomy ($\beta = .36, p < .001$), and content relevance ($\beta = .29, p < .01$) as statistically significant predictors of classroom engagement. Collectively, these variables explained 48% of the variance in engagement ($R^2 = .48$), indicating a substantial explanatory effect according to conventional benchmarks for educational research. The relative magnitude of standardized coefficients demonstrates that perceived teacher support exerted the strongest predictive influence, followed by learner autonomy and instructional relevance.

RQ2: Relationships Among Motivation, Engagement, and Academic Achievement

Pearson correlation analysis revealed statistically significant positive associations:

- Motivation ↔ Classroom Engagement ($r = .62, p < .01$)
- Motivation ↔ Academic Achievement ($r = .54, p < .01$)
- Engagement ↔ Academic Achievement ($r = .58, p < .01$)

These coefficients represent moderate to strong effect sizes, showing practically meaningful relationships rather than merely statistical significance. The strength of the motivation–engagement association suggests that motivational quality functions as a central driver of students' active learning involvement.

4.1.1 Statistical Meaning of Mediation

Mediation analysis using PROCESS Model 4 indicated that classroom engagement partially mediated the relationship between motivation and academic achievement (indirect effect = .18, 95% CI [.09, .29]). The confidence interval excluded zero, confirming statistical significance. The direct pathway from motivation to achievement remained significant, showing complementary mediation. This pattern proves that motivation enhances academic performance both directly and indirectly through its impact on engagement processes. The magnitude of the indirect effect indicates a substantively meaningful explanatory pathway.

4.1.2 Comparison Across Engagement Dimensions

Differential analysis across engagement dimensions revealed that behavioral engagement proved the strongest association with academic achievement, followed by cognitive engagement, while emotional engagement showed a moderate but significant relationship. This distribution suggests that sustained participation and task involvement represent the most immediate mechanism linking motivation to academic performance within exam-oriented instructional contexts.

4.2 Qualitative Findings

Thematic analysis identified three major themes that converged with quantitative patterns:

1. Exam-oriented instructional pressure limits communicative practice
2. Restricted learner autonomy reduces perceived agency
3. Motivational influence of supportive teacher–student relationships

Students described instructional environments emphasizing performance outcomes over communicative competence. Observations confirmed teacher-centered patterns that constrained interaction. Conversely, autonomy-supportive practices such as collaborative work, learner choice, and authentic communication were associated with increased persistence, confidence, and participation. These qualitative insights provide contextual explanations for the statistical relationships observed in the quantitative model.

Therefore, the convergence between statistical relationships and thematic findings indicates that motivational processes operate through structured classroom engagement mechanisms shaped by instructional context. These findings provide empirical support for theoretically grounded interpretations of motivation-driven learning behavior in Saudi EFL environments.

5. Discussion

The present study provides convergent quantitative and qualitative evidence that student motivation functions as a foundational determinant of classroom engagement and academic achievement in Saudi EFL contexts. The moderate to strong effect sizes observed across structural analyses show that motivational processes exert not only statistical significance but also meaningful educational impact within structured language learning environments. These findings align with meta-analytic evidence proving that individual differences in second language motivation significantly predict learning outcomes across contexts (Al-Hoorie et al., 2021), reinforcing the centrality of motivational quality in L2 development.

The substantial proportion of explained variance in classroom engagement highlights the critical role of teacher support, learner autonomy, and instructional relevance as contextual conditions shaping motivational functioning. These findings are consistent with Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000), which posits that satisfaction of autonomy, competence, and relatedness needs enhances intrinsic motivation and sustained effort. Empirical research in Saudi EFL classrooms similarly shows that autonomy-supportive teacher behaviors significantly enhance learner motivation (Alrabai, 2020), while learner-centered instructional shifts produce measurable gains in engagement and performance (Sharma, 2022). Together, these converging findings suggest that motivation in EFL classrooms is not merely an internal trait, but a contextually responsive process shaped by pedagogical structure.

The mediation model offers important theoretical clarification by demonstrating that classroom engagement functions as the mechanism translating motivational disposition into academic performance. This finding aligns with research showing that autonomy-supportive teaching enhances engagement by supporting psychological need satisfaction (Reeve, 2006). It is also consistent with large-scale mediation models showing that motivation influences academic achievement indirectly through engagement-based pathways (Ito & Umemoto, 2022; Shao et al., 2024). Furthermore, Shao et al. (2020) proved that self-determined motivation predicts behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement, reinforcing the interpretation that engagement represents the operational enactment of motivational resources. By empirically modeling this pathway in a Saudi EFL context, the present study extends process-oriented motivational theory into an exam-driven instructional environment.

The comparatively strong predictive role of behavioral engagement observed in this study warrants contextual interpretation. In assessment-driven systems, observable participation and sustained task involvement may serve as immediate determinants of performance. This interpretation aligns with Martin's (2009) developmental model of motivation and engagement, which highlights the performance relevance of behavioral engagement across educational stages. It also resonates with findings that technology-enhanced and learner-centered pedagogies, such as online project-based learning and flipped classroom strengthen behavioral and cognitive engagement while simultaneously improving achievement outcomes (Al-Bahadli et al., 2023; Eltahir & Alsalhi, 2025). These instructional innovations prove how structured pedagogical design can activate motivational pathways through engagement processes.

Qualitative findings further contextualize the mediation results by illustrating how exam-oriented instructional structures may constrain learner autonomy and communicative participation. Prior research in Saudi and Middle Eastern EFL contexts similarly reports that teacher-centered instruction and assessment pressure undermine motivational intensity and learner agency (Holbah & Sharma, 2021; Sharma, 2024). Psychological barriers such as foreign language anxiety also restrict engagement behaviors (Oteir & Al-Otaibi, 2019; Teimouri et al., 2022), suggesting that affective constraints may moderate motivational enactment in structured classrooms. Conversely, supportive classroom climates characterized by teacher encouragement, praise, and emotional safety have been shown to enhance engagement and persistence (Peng, 2021; Devi, 2024). These contextual insights strengthen the interpretation that engagement mediates motivation most effectively when instructional environments satisfy psychological needs.

The present findings also align with broader higher education research demonstrating that social and instructional supports indirectly influence achievement through motivational and engagement mechanisms (Bayoumy & Alsayed, 2021; Chen et al., 2023). However, unlike sequential mediation models incorporating variables such as life satisfaction (Chen et al., 2023), the present study identifies a more direct pedagogical pathway operating through teacher support

and learner autonomy. This distinction underscores the contextual specificity of motivational mechanisms in language learning environments, particularly those characterized by structured curricula and high-stakes assessment.

Thus, the findings suggest that motivation operates not solely as an internal learner attribute but as a contextually mediated psychological process enacted through classroom engagement structures. By integrating Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000) and Dörnyei's (2005) L2 Motivational Self System within a mixed-methods mediation framework, the study provides empirical support for understanding engagement as the operational bridge between motivational orientation and academic achievement in Saudi EFL education.

5.1 Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the sample size was relatively small and drawn from a single geographic area in Riyadh, which may restrict the generalizability of the findings to other Saudi or international EFL contexts. Future research should include participants from diverse educational institutions, regions, and socioeconomic backgrounds to enhance external validity and enable broader generalization of motivational processes. Second, the study employed a cross-sectional design for the quantitative component, which limits the ability to make definitive causal claims regarding the relationships among motivation, engagement, and academic achievement. Longitudinal research designs are recommended to capture motivational dynamics over time and to provide stronger evidence of causal pathways. In addition, intervention-based studies implementing autonomy-supportive and learner-centered pedagogical strategies would be valuable for empirically testing the effectiveness of specific motivational practices in EFL classrooms.

Finally, although the study integrated quantitative and qualitative data to provide a comprehensive understanding of motivation and engagement, further methodological triangulation could strengthen future research. Incorporating additional data sources, such as classroom artifacts, reflective journals, or peer assessment measures, may offer deeper insights into how motivational constructs operate in authentic classroom settings. Addressing these limitations would contribute to a more robust and generalizable understanding of motivation-driven engagement in EFL education.

Conclusion

This study provides empirical evidence that student motivation significantly influences classroom engagement and academic achievement in Saudi EFL contexts. By integrating SDT and the L2 Motivational Self System, the findings prove that autonomy-supportive teaching practices and emotionally supportive classroom climates enhance both motivational quality and academic outcomes. These findings position motivation-driven engagement as a central

mechanism through which pedagogical environments influence academic success in EFL education.

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AI Declaration

The author declares that this manuscript involves no plagiarism or fabrication of data, and all ethical guidelines for educational research have been strictly adhered to during the conduct of the study. AI tools, if used, were solely for language refinement, grammatical clarity and formatting assistance. No AI tool was used for generating the core ideas, analysis, interpretations, or findings of the research.

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Dr. Lana Hussain Ahmed Shehata is an English language educator and researcher affiliated with Alkhaleej Company at King Saud University. Her research focuses on second language motivation, learner engagement, autonomy-supportive pedagogy, and mixed-methods research in EFL contexts. She has extensive experience in university-level English language instruction and curriculum development within exam-oriented educational environments. Her work aims to bridge motivational theory and classroom practice to enhance learner participation and academic achievement in higher-education language programs, particularly in Middle Eastern contexts.

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