



Motivational Challenges in Online EFL Learning: A Comprehensive Review of the Literature

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التحديات التحفيزية في تعلم اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية عبر الإنترنت: مراجعة شاملة للأدبيات

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Revised: 02-03-2026; Accepted: 17-03-2026; Published: 20-04-2026

تاريخ الاستلام: 2026/02/16 - تاريخ المراجعة: 2026/03/13 - تاريخ القبول: 2026/03/14 - تاريخ للنشر: 2026/04/28

Abstract:

This paper investigates motivational challenges in online EFL learning. Since motivation is one of the key issues that impact L2 learners' performance in the language learning process, and online platforms become an important tool of transforming knowledge, it is crucial to highlight the major motivational difficulties that affect L2 learning in online context. This study employs a literature-based review approach to examine research on motivational challenges in online EFL learning. Relevant studies were involved if they (a) focus on EFL or ESL contexts, (b) studied online or blended learning environments, and (c) identified motivational factors or challenges. Both qualitative and quantitative studies published recently were involved to ensure relevance to current online learning practices. This review highlights many issues affects motivation in online learning such as, lack of social interaction, technical issues, psychological factors and other external factors like course designer and teacher support. In addition, passive participation and engagement was also an issue. The implication of this study proposes that technology has the potential to enhance motivation if it is used effectively teachers and online course designers should give more importance to motivation regarding their strategies, teaching methods, material presented, and learners' style trying to increase students interest and engagement in online context .

Keywords: online EFL, motivation, self-determination theory, L2 motivational self-system, motivational challenges

الملخص:

تبحث هذه الورقة في التحديات التحفيزية في تعلم اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية عبر الإنترنت. وبما أن الدافعية تُعد أحد العوامل الأساسية التي تؤثر في أداء متعلمي اللغة الثانية في عملية تعلم اللغة، ولأن المنصات الإلكترونية أصبحت أداة مهمة لنقل المعرفة، فمن الضروري تسليط الضوء على أهم الصعوبات التحفيزية التي تؤثر على تعلم اللغة الثانية في السياق الإلكتروني. تعتمد هذه الدراسة على منهج المراجعة الأدبية لفحص الأبحاث المتعلقة بالتحديات التحفيزية في تعلم اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية عبر الإنترنت. وقد تم تضمين

الدراسات ذات الصلة إذا كانت (أ) تركز على سياقات اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية أو ثانية، (ب) درست بيئات التعلم عبر الإنترنت أو المدمج، و(ج) تناولت العوامل أو التحديات التحفيزية. وقد شملت الدراسة كلاً من البحوث الكيفية والكمية المنشورة حديثاً لضمان ملاءمتها لممارسات التعلم الإلكتروني الحالية. وتُظهر هذه المراجعة العديد من القضايا التي تؤثر على الدافعية في التعلم عبر الإنترنت، مثل نقص التفاعل الاجتماعي، والمشكلات التقنية، والعوامل النفسية، بالإضافة إلى عوامل خارجية مثل تصميم المقرر ودعم المعلم. كما تم تحديد ضعف المشاركة السلبية وقلة التفاعل كإحدى المشكلات أيضاً. وتشير نتائج الدراسة إلى أن التكنولوجيا تمتلك القدرة على تعزيز الدافعية إذا تم استخدامها بشكل فعال، لذا ينبغي على المعلمين ومصممي المقررات الإلكترونية إيلاء اهتمام أكبر للدافعية في استراتيجياتهم، وطرائق التدريس، والمواد التعليمية المقدمة، وأساليب تعلم الطلاب، وذلك بهدف زيادة اهتمام الطلاب وتعزيز مشاركتهم في السياق الإلكتروني.

الكلمات المفتاحية: تعلم اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية عبر الإنترنت، الدافعية، نظرية تحديد الذات، نظام الذات التحفيزي في تعلم اللغة الثانية، التحديات التحفيزية

1. Introduction

The rapid expansion of online learning has significantly transformed English as a foreign language (EFL) education, offering learners flexible access to instructions beyond traditional classroom boundaries. Advances in digital technology and the increased demand for distance education have positioned online EFL learning as a central mode of language instruction in many educational contexts.

Motivation has consistently been identified as a crucial factor in successful EFL learning, influencing learners' engagement, persistence and overall achievement. In language learning contexts, motivated learners are more likely to invest sustained effort, employ effective learning strategies, and achieve higher proficiency levels. Consequently, understanding factors that affect learner motivation is essential for improving EFL learning outcomes.

However, maintaining learner motivation in online EFL environments presents distinct challenges. Compared to face-to-face instruction, online learning often involves reduced teacher- student interaction, limited opportunities for social engagement, and increased reliance on learners' self-regulation and autonomy. These characteristics can negatively impact learners' motivation and lead to disengagement or attrition.

Although a growing body of research has investigated motivation in online learning and EFL contexts separately, studies focusing specifically on motivational challenges in online EFL learning are dispersed across different contexts and theoretical perspectives. As a result, there is a need for a comprehensive review that synthesizes existing findings and identifies common challenges and trends in the literature.

Therefore, the purpose for this paper is to review and critically analyze existing literature on motivational challenges in online EFL learning. The review categorizes these challenges into learner- related, teacher-related, technological, and contextual factors and examines strategies proposed in the literature to address them. This paper concluding by discussing implications for EFL instructors and highlighting directions for future research.

2. Literature review

2.1 Motivation in EFL context

Learner motivation is an area that interests a number of researchers since it is closely related to achievement and desired performance. In EFL context, where, learners often have limited exposure to the target language outside the classroom. Motivation plays a particularly dynamic role in sustain engagement and effort overtime. The term motivation is generally used to refer to what leads a learner to perform efforts in L2 learning (Dörnyei and Ushioda 2011). Dörnyei (2020) also confirms that the concept of motivation is closely associated with engagement and motivation must take part to achieve student engagement.

Motivation is an issue that describes someone's willingness to do something, this desire can be created inside or outside a person. Being motivated can help learners to be effective learners because they can select their own ways to accomplish their goals. Lumsden (1994) defines motivation as learners' desire to take part in the language learning context. Brophy (2010, p. 3) defines motivation as "a theoretical construct to explain the initiation, direction, intensity, persistence, and quality of behavior, especially goal-directed behavior". Motivation includes goals that afford the impetus for purposeful actions and specific direction, power and determination to yield a good behavior, in this definition motivation is a process rather than a final result.

Motivation plays an important role in facilitating second language learning. According to Dörnyei (1994), motivation is one of the key determinants of second language learning achievement. Paris and Turner (1994) describe motivation as the 'engine' that controls the learning process. According to (Schunk & Usher, 2012) Motivation has a high effect on what we learn, how we learn and when we choose to learn. Mainly researchers distinguished between two types of motivation intrinsic and extrinsic. Dörnyei (1994) distinguished between the two by saying that, extrinsic motivation based on the rewards from outside sources such as getting good grades or to avoid punishment. Intrinsic motivation on the other hand, is based on inside rewards such as the joy of doing a particular activity or satisfying one curiosity. In EFL context, both types of motivation interrelate dynamically and can fluctuate relying on different factors, including instructional methods and learning situations. Online learning environment may reshape how these motivational orientations develop and are sustained.

2.2 Essential motivation theories relevant to EFL

Many theoretical frameworks have been broadly applied to illuminate motivation in EFL learning contexts. The most relevant theories to online learning are self-determination theory (SDT) and the L2 Motivational Self-System.

Self-determination theory highlights the role of three main psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. In this theory, learners are more likely to develop intrinsic motivation when these needs are fulfilled. Recent research (Chen & Jang, 2010; Hartnett, 2010) has confirmed that self-determination theory offers a beneficial analytic tool for investigating the complexity of motivation in online contexts. In online EFL context, autonomy is often high because of flexible learning environment; however, competence and relatedness may be negatively affected by limited feedback and reduced social interaction. Therefore, online environments can both support and hinder motivation depending on how they are designed and applied.

The L2 motivational self system, created by Dörnyei, hypothesizes motivation as a function of learners' future self – image including the ideal L2 self, the ought- to self, and L2 learning experience. Online EFL learning can impact these components by shaping learning experience and insights of language learning. For instance, poorly designed online courses may undermine learners' L2 learning experience, thereby decreasing overall motivation.

2.3 Online EFL learning framework

Online EFL learning refers to language instruction delivered partially or entirely through digital platforms. According to (Hartnett 2016) there are a number of terms that refer to the use of digital technologies in learning such as, distance, online, flexible, blended, flipped, mixed and MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses). Bullen and Janes (2007) have hypothesized a scale of technology use to help understand these terms, ranging from face-to-face to fully distance environment. However, the most usable term to describe anything on the field that includes digital technology in the learning context is 'e-learning' (Nichols, 2008). Bates (2005) views that the terms 'e-learning' and 'online learning' are used interchangeably, but creates the difference that e-learning can include any form of technology while online learning refers exactly to using the internet and the web. There are a number of definitions for online learning by scholars such as (Bates, 2005; Ally 2008; Bach et al, 2007; Anderson 2011). one useful definition is produced by Ally (2008) who defines online learning as "... the use of the internet to access materials; to interact with the content, instructor, and other learners; and to obtain support during the learning process, in order to acquire knowledge, to construct personal meaning, and to grow from the learning experience. (p. 5)

Online classes are characterized by physical separation between teachers and learners, dependence on technology-mediated communication, and high learner responsibility. Compared to face-to-face classrooms, online EFL learning affords more flexibility and access but may limit natural interaction and immediate feedback.

While online learning can enhance an EFL student's ability to construct their own learner autonomy and use an individualized learning path, it also places important demands on learner's self-regulation skills. Without sufficient instructional support, these demands can negatively impact motivation, especially among learners who are adapted to teacher-centered instructional methods. Consequently, understanding motivational challenges within online EFL settings requires close attention to both learner characteristics and contextual conditions.

2.4 Motivational challenges in online EFL learning

One of the most widely reported concerns in the literature is the lack of social interaction in online learning platform. Unlike traditional classrooms, online settings often limit spontaneous communication and peer work. As a result, students feel isolated. According to Meşe& Sevilen, (2021) students recorded low motivation levels because of reduced opportunities for interaction with both teachers and classmates and they mentioned increased motivation levels as a result of adequate teacher feedback and sufficient interaction with teachers. Similarly, Ushida (2005) pointed out that teachers play an essential role in creating a classroom setting that affects students' motivation positively. This lack of social presence can decrease learners' sense of belonging, which is important for promoting motivation in language learning framework. In a similar study by Karatas and Tuncer (2025) who highlight that online learning considered as impersonal which therefore negatively affects emotional connection for learners and reduces their willingness to perform actively. Although, the stated studies indicate the importance of social interaction, they do not exactly refer to the quality of interaction or learners' individual styles. For instance, some students may prefer self-regulating way of learning and may not necessarily consider low interaction as demotivating. Consequently, future research should move beyond generalization and inspect how diverse types of interaction influence different learners.

Besides social challenges, technical issues and digital knowledge play a critical role in influencing learner motivation. Many students face difficulties related to unreliable internet connection, lack of familiarity with online platforms and limited technical skills. These barriers can create frustration and hinder effective participation in learning activities. Karats and Tuncer (2025) found that student's motivation closely related to their ability to navigate digital tools and access course materials easily. When learners are faced with technology problems, their attention shifts from language acquisition to problem solving technical issues, which negatively influences their engagement. Furthermore, inadequate technical support and poorly designed platforms can exacerbate these challenges, making online learning less appealing for EFL students.

Psychological factors also play an important factor in shaping motivation in online EFL learning self-efficacy, or learners' belief in their ability to succeed, has been identified as a key element of motivation. Zhang and Cui (2023) argue that students with higher levels of self-efficacy and grit are more likely to remain motivated in online environments despite challenges. Conversely, learners with low confidence may experience anxiety and disengagement, particularly when they lack immediate feedback or support from instructors. The concept of the "ideal L2self" which refers to learners' vision of themselves as successful language user, is also crucial in sustaining motivation (Boo et al.,2021). However, maintaining this vision can be more difficult in online contexts where learners may feel disconnected from authentic language use and real-life communication.

Another important dimension in online EFL learning is the role of external factors, particularly course designer and teacher support. According to Alqahtani (2019) and Alkarkhi & Hmouma (2025), in the context of Self-Determination Theory, motivation is dependent on whether the learner's needs for autonomy, competence and relatedness are being fulfilled. In online environments, poorly structured courses, lack of clear instructions and limited feedback can undermine these needs, leading to decreased motivation. Effective instructional design, on the other hand, can promote engagement by including interactive activities, using multimedia resources, and opportunities for collaboration. In addition, Hassan (2022) states that teachers play a crucial role in enhancing students motivation by using appropriate strategies, such as encouraging participation, providing timely feedback, and integrating technology in a way that encourage student engagement.

Low participation and engagement are also commonly reported issues in online EFL learning. Students often adopt passive learning behavior such as low interaction and minimal contribution during online sessions, which can be attributed to both motivational and contextual factors. Ismael (2023) and Alsaeh et al. (2026) found that students frequently exhibit low levels of responsiveness and cooperation in online settings. Low level of

engagement can inhibit motivation and also limit opportunities for language practice, which is necessary for developing communicative competence. Moreover, the absence of immediate accountability in online contexts can make it easier for students to disengage from learning activities.

3. Conclusion

In conclusion, the literature shows that motivational challenges in online EFL learning are multifaceted and interrelated. Social interaction, technical difficulties, psychological barriers, an insufficient instructional design all contribute to reduced learner motivation. Addressing these challenges requires a comprehensive approach that comprises improving interaction, providing technical support, fostering positive psychological traits and designing engaging and learner-centered courses. By understanding and highlighting these factors, educators can propose more effective online courses that boost students interest and motivation. However, the literature reveals some limitation, including overgeneralization of results, reliance on self-reported data, lack of longitudinal research and insufficient attention to contextual and cultural factors. Future research is necessary to adopt diverse methods of inquiry to enhance our understanding of motivation as a dynamic phenomenon in the online learning environment. Addressing gaps will be essential for developing effective strategies to encourage and maintain motivation among EFL learners.

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