Intrinsic and Extrinsic Motivation in Second Language Acquisition

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Abstract

Motivation known to be one of the most significant determinants of success in Second Language Acquisition (SLA). It influences the effort learners put in and the quality of their engagement and learning outcomes. Early SLA research viewed motivation as a psychological trait within the individual, separating intrinsic and extrinsic factors. However, more recent developments in educational psychology and applied linguistics emphasise learner autonomy, determination, identity and emotion, along with the influence of their social environment.

Therefore, this scoping review examines intrinsic and extrinsic motivation within SLA, from early socio-psychological frameworks to contemporary approaches. It includes Self-Determination Theory, sociocultural frameworks and theories of identity. Recent research conducted by scholars such as Ryan and Deci (2017), Noels (2020), Darvin and Norton (2021), Mercer and Dornyei (2020) and Hiver and Al-Hoorie (2020) shows that motivation within learning environments is variable, rather than a fixed characteristic. In fact, intrinsic and extrinsic motivations change and interact continuously as learners deal with changing contexts, develop their identities and engage in active participation. Therefore, teaching must support the individual while creating an inclusive and emotionally supportive learning environment that fosters internal and extrinsic motivation.

Keywords: Second Language Acquisition (SLA), Intrinsic motivation , Extrinsic motivation , learnin

الملخص .

يُعدّ الدافع أحد أهمّ العوامل المؤثرة في نجاح اكتساب اللغة الثانية. فهو يؤثر على الجهد الذي يبذله المتعلمون وجودة مشاركتهم   ونتائج تعلمهم. وقد نظرت الدراسات المبكرة في مجال اكتساب اللغة الثانية إلى الدافع كسمة نفسية داخل الفرد، ففصلت بين العوامل الداخلية والخارجية. إلا أن التطورات الحديثة في علم النفس التربوي واللغويات التطبيقية تُركّز على استقلالية المتعلم، وعزيمته، وهويته، وعواطفه، إلى جانب تأثير بيئته الاجتماعية.

لذا، تتناول هذه المراجعة الشاملة الدافع الداخلي والخارجي في مجال اكتساب اللغة الثانية، بدءًا من الأطر الاجتماعية والنفسية المبكرة وصولًا إلى المناهج المعاصرة. وتشمل هذه المراجعة نظرية تقرير المصير، والأطر الاجتماعية والثقافية، ونظريات الهوية.   أظهرت دراسات حديثة أجراها باحثون مثل Ryan and Deci (2017), Noels (2020), Darvin and Norton (2021), Mercer and Dornyei (2020) and Hiver and Al-Hoorie أن الدافعية في بيئات التعلم متغيرة وليست ثابتة. في الواقع، تتغير الدوافع الداخلية والخارجية وتتفاعل باستمرار مع تعامل المتعلمين مع السياقات المتغيرة، وتطوير هوياتهم، وانخراطهم في مشاركة فعّالة. لذلك، يجب أن يدعم التدريس الفرد مع خلق بيئة تعليمية شاملة وداعمة عاطفياً تعزز الدافعية الداخلية.   والخارجية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: اكتساب للغة الثانية، الدافعية الداخلية، الدافعية الخارجية ،التعلم .

Introduction

Motivation has always been an important topic in Second Language Acquisition (SLA). From early studies to modern global classrooms, researchers agree that motivation helps learners stay engaged, overcome challenges and reach higher levels in a new language. Even when students have similar teachers, resources or learning

conditions, their success often depends on how motivated they are (Mercer & Dornyei, 2020). In the past, scholars often described motivation in simple psychological terms. They divided it into intrinsic motivation (when learners study because they enjoy it) and extrinsic motivation (when they study for rewards or outside pressure). Intrinsic motivation was usually seen as more valuable for long-term learning. However, newer theories, especially Self-Determination Theory (SDT), argue that this separation is too simple.

According to modern research, learners often have many different motivations at the same time. These motivations can change depending on the learner's personal life, classroom environment, relationships and social context (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Sociocultural and identity-based theories also show that motivation is not only inside the learner, but influenced strongly by people around them, the support they receive and how they see themselves as language users (Ushioda, 2009; Darvin & Norton, 2021).

For many international students and migrants, motivation is especially complex. They often need the language for work, study or immigration reasons (extrinsic motivation), but they also develop personal interest or identity connections with the language (intrinsic motivation). Therefore, understanding motivation today requires looking at psychology, classroom practice, social participation and how learners build their identities.

The purpose of this review is to bring together classical and modern perspectives on intrinsic and extrinsic motivation in SLA. It begins by explaining early socio-psychological theories before discussing SDT, dynamic approaches, sociocultural and ecological theories, and identity-based frameworks. The review also considers how intrinsic and extrinsic motivation influence each other in real learning contexts and ends with pedagogical implications for teachers.

Historical Development of Motivation Theory in SLA

Motivation became an important concept in SLA research during the mid-twentieth century, especially through the work of Gardner and Lambert. Their socio-psychological framework aimed to explain why some learners achieved better results than others, even when they received similar instruction. They argue that language learning is not only a mental or behavioural process, but is strongly influenced by learners' attitudes, values and feelings toward the target language and its speakers (Gardner, 1985).

A key idea in this model is the difference between integrative and instrumental orientations. Integrative orientation means learning a language to feel closer to, or to identify with, the target language community. Instrumental orientation refers to practical reasons for studying, such as getting a better job, passing exams or gaining educational opportunities. Although Gardner did not use the exact terms "intrinsic" and "extrinsic," there are clear similarities: instrumental reasons are close to extrinsic motivation, while integrative reasons often resemble intrinsic interest.

Gardner's theory influenced SLA research for many years, and many studies have confirmed the importance of integrative motivation in contexts where learners had real contact with second language communities, such as in Canadian bilingual programmes (Masgoret & Gardner, 2003). Researchers often used surveys and motivation scales to measure attitudes and predict achievement.

However, criticism of this model grew as SLA research expanded into new countries and new theoretical approaches. Oxford and Shearin (1994) argue that the socio-psychological model does not include important factors recognised in educational psychology, such as learners' confidence, beliefs about success or the value they

see in tasks. Also, in many foreign language contexts, learners rarely meet native speakers. For these learners, integrative motivation is difficult to interpret, yet many remain highly motivated.

By the late 1990s, scholars began to question the idea that motivation is a stable, unchanging trait. Researchers noticed that motivation rises and falls depending on classroom conditions, teacher behaviour and personal experiences. Dornyei (2005) argued for a dynamic view of motivation that changes over time. Self-Determination Theory (SDT) played an important role in this shift. SDT, developed by Deci and Ryan, explains motivation along a continuum rather than a simple intrinsic–extrinsic divide. According to SDT, extrinsic motivation can become more internalised when learners accept and value their goals. This helps explain why learners driven by external reasons can still show strong effort and long-term engagement when their learning environment supports autonomy, competence and relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2017).

During the early 21st century, SLA motivation research also moved toward sociocultural and poststructural approaches. Norton (1995) introduced the concept of investment, which focuses on how learners negotiate access to social and linguistic opportunities. Motivation is therefore influenced by identity, power relations and learners' positions within society. Globalisation, mobility and digital communication have expanded this perspective, making learners part of multiple, diverse language communities.

More recently, complex dynamic systems theory has emphasised that motivation does not follow a straight line. Instead, it changes in unpredictable ways as learners respond to internal and external factors (Hiver & Al-Hoorie, 2020). These developments show a major shift away from simple trait-based explanations toward more dynamic, socially grounded understandings of motivation.

Intrinsic Motivation in Second Language Acquisition

Intrinsic motivation means engaging in learning because the activity itself feels interesting or satisfying. In SLA, intrinsic motivation has traditionally been connected with deeper learning, stronger effort and more resilience when tasks are difficult. However, recent research shows that intrinsic motivation does not only come from inside the learner. Instead, it develops through relationships, emotions and meaningful participation in learning environments (Ryan & Deci, 2017; Mercer & Dornyei, 2020).

Self-Determination Theory (SDT) is one of the most influential frameworks for understanding intrinsic motivation. SDT suggests that intrinsic motivation grows when three basic needs are supported: autonomy, competence and relatedness. Autonomy refers to feeling that one has control or personal choice in learning. In language education, autonomy does not mean studying completely alone. Rather, it means that learners feel their actions match their own goals and interests. Benson (2011) and Lamb (2017) explain that autonomy depends on the environment. Learners can only experience autonomy if the classroom gives them opportunities to make choices, express opinions and reflect on their own progress. This is why teachers' practices, such as offering task choices, encouraging self-reflection and supporting goal-setting, are important for building intrinsic motivation.

Competence is another key factor. It means feeling capable of achieving success in learning tasks. Learners are more willing to participate when they believe they can improve. Positive learning experiences reinforce this feeling, while repeated failure or strict correction may damage confidence. Classrooms that provide scaffolded tasks, helpful feedback and opportunities for successful communication help learners develop a sense of competence. Research by Sato and Loewen (2019) shows that collaborative tasks can increase competence because learners support each other, negotiate meaning together and experience real-time progress.

Relatedness, or feeling connected to people in the learning environment, is also central to intrinsic motivation. Language learning is highly social, and learners need supportive relationships to feel confident. Mercer and Dornyei (2020) point out that learners participate more actively when they feel respected, valued and emotionally safe. A positive classroom climate encourages learners to take risks, communicate more and stay engaged. Willingness to communicate, which is an important concept in SLA, is closely tied to relatedness, because learners speak more when they feel comfortable with peers and teachers.

Modern research also views intrinsic motivation as dynamic rather than stable. It changes from moment to moment depending on emotional experiences, task difficulty and interactions with others. Hiver and Al-Hoorie (2020) show that learners' motivation can rise or fall within a single lesson. For example, a student may feel confident at the beginning of a task but lose motivation after a communication breakdown. On the other hand, a successful interaction can suddenly increase motivation. This means intrinsic motivation is not something fixed; it is constantly shaped by ongoing experiences.

Intrinsic motivation is also influenced by identity. Learners often feel more intrinsically motivated when they can express themselves, connect personal experiences to learning or engage in tasks that feel meaningful. Digital platforms can support this because they allow learners to participate in online communities, games or social networks where they can use the language in authentic and personalised ways (Lai, 2017). These environments can increase intrinsic motivation when they support autonomy and creativity, although access and digital confidence also play an important role.

Overall, intrinsic motivation in SLA is more than an internal interest. It is a process that develops through meaningful experiences, supportive relationships and classroom conditions that encourage agency, confidence and participation. Understanding intrinsic motivation requires looking both at the learner's psychology and at the social and emotional environment in which learning takes place.

Extrinsic Motivation in Second Language Acquisition

Extrinsic motivation refers to learning that is influenced by factors outside the activity itself. In SLA, this usually includes practical goals such as finding a job, passing exams or meeting academic and immigration requirements. Early SLA research often viewed extrinsic motivation as less valuable than intrinsic motivation because it was believed to produce only surface-level engagement. However, newer research in motivational psychology and applied linguistics challenges this idea. Today, scholars recognise that extrinsic motivation can support deep and long-term learning when it becomes internalised and connected to the learner's own goals, identity and sense of agency.

Self-Determination Theory (SDT) helped to change how researchers understand extrinsic motivation. Instead of dividing motivation into intrinsic versus extrinsic, SDT describes a continuum of internalisation. At one end is external regulation, where learners act only because of pressure or rewards. At the other end is integrated regulation, where learners accept external goals as personally meaningful (Ryan & Deci, 2017). For example, a student may start learning English only to satisfy a university requirement. However, if they later recognise the value of academic English or feel more confident and successful, their extrinsic motivation can become internalised. When this happens, their engagement and persistence may become similar to intrinsic motivation.

Research also shows that extrinsic motivation depends strongly on context. In many countries, especially in East Asia and the Middle East, family expectations, social responsibility and national goals are normal and valued sources of motivation (Lamb, 2017). In these settings, external pressure does not necessarily reduce agency.

Instead, extrinsic motives can support personal ambitions. Chirkov (2016) argues that assuming intrinsic motivation is always superior reflects a Western viewpoint that does not fit all cultures. In collectivist societies, social expectations may be experienced as meaningful, motivating and even positive.

Extrinsic motivation is also critical in the lives of international students, migrants and refugees. For these learners, language proficiency is essential for work, education or immigration processes. Darvin and Norton (2021) explain that such external pressures are not only psychological but structural, shaping learners' access to opportunities and recognition. Here, extrinsic motivation is part of real social conditions, not a lack of interest. In many cases, extrinsic motives are logical and adaptive responses to the challenges of living, studying or working in a new community.

However, extrinsic motivation alone cannot guarantee long-term engagement. It is more effective when learners understand the purpose of tasks and experience autonomy, competence and relatedness. Conversely, environments that rely on pressure, strict rules, punishment or negative emotional climates may prevent learners from internalising external goals. In such cases, learners may meet basic requirements but remain detached from the learning process. Internalisation is therefore essential. When learners have opportunities to explore personal reasons for learning English, extrinsic motives can shift toward more self-determined forms. Teachers play an important role by encouraging goal-setting, reflection and connecting English learning to personal or community aspirations. Even learners who start with only external obligations can develop deeper commitment through positive classroom experiences.

Contemporary research also emphasises that extrinsic motivation is dynamic, not fixed. Studies by Hiver and Al-Hoorie (2020) and by Dornyei, Henry and Muir (2016) show that motivation changes over time based on emotions, success, relationships and identity development. A learner may begin a course with strong extrinsic pressure to pass an exam but later experience increased intrinsic interest through social interaction. The opposite can also happen if stress or testing creates anxiety. Therefore, extrinsic motivation evolves in response to real experiences. Overall, extrinsic motivation in SLA is best understood as a normal, meaningful and sometimes necessary part of learning. When supported by teachers and environments that encourage internalisation, extrinsic motives can lead to strong, sustained and effective engagement.

Interactions Between Intrinsic and Extrinsic Motivation

Although intrinsic and extrinsic motivation are often described as opposites, modern research shows that they are closely connected and constantly influence each other. Learners rarely depend on only one type of motivation. Instead, they use multiple motives that change according to emotions, classroom experiences and identity development.

SDT has been important in explaining these interactions. It shows that extrinsic motivation can become more internalised when learners feel autonomy, competence and relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2017). For example, a learner who studies English only to pass an exam may later develop a personal interest in communication or academic reading if they feel supported in class. In such cases, extrinsic and intrinsic motivation begin to work together.

Classroom conditions strongly affect whether this internalisation happens. Research shows that environments with autonomy support, constructive feedback and meaningful communication promote higher levels of self-determined motivation (Mercer & Dörnyei, 2020). On the other hand, environments dominated by pressure, competition or harsh evaluation often encourage compliance but not long-term engagement.

Motivation also changes over time. Work based on complex dynamic systems theory shows that motivation rises and falls within minutes, days or semesters (Dornyei, Henry & Muir, 2016). A learner who feels confident during one activity may lose motivation after a mistake and then regain it after a successful interaction. Over longer periods, intrinsic and extrinsic motives can shift in importance depending on learners' experiences.

Directed Motivational Currents (DMCs) demonstrate how intrinsic and extrinsic motives can come together in powerful ways. A learner preparing for a high-stakes exam may begin with external pressure but may enter a DMC if the process becomes personally meaningful or connected to a strong future self-image. This shows how external goals can trigger deep, long-term engagement.

Identity also plays a central role. Norton's concept of investment (1995, 2013) explains that learners participate when they believe their identity will benefit from using the target language. External reasons for learning, such as career goals, can become intertwined with personal meaning when learners feel more confident or legitimate in the classroom. However, negative experiences, such as discrimination or exclusion, can weaken both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation (Darvin & Norton, 2021).

Contemporary research therefore recognises that intrinsic and extrinsic motivations are deeply interconnected. Instead of asking whether a learner is intrinsically or extrinsically motivated, it is more useful to examine how different motives interact and how learning environments support or hinder these interactions.

Sociocultural and Ecological Perspectives on Motivation

Sociocultural and ecological approaches argue that motivation is shaped not only by internal factors but also by social relationships, cultural norms, institutional structures and political conditions. From this perspective, motivation is co-constructed through participation in meaningful activities and cannot be separated from the environment in which learning takes place.

Sociocultural theory, based on Vygotsky, views learning as a social process. Motivation increases when learners collaborate, feel supported and share meaningful goals. Lantolf and Thorne (2006) argue that motivation often emerges during participation, not before it. For example, a learner who begins with low motivation may become more engaged during a collaborative task if the environment supports inclusion and communication.

Ecological theories expand this view by examining how multiple layers of context influence motivation. Van Lier (2004) explains that motivation depends on the affordances learners perceive in their environment, and opportunities for action that feel available and meaningful. A classroom may offer many speaking activities, but if a learner feels anxious or unwelcome, they may not see them as real opportunities. Furthermore, Ushioda's "person-in-context" approach (2009, 2011) emphasises that motivation depends on how learners feel in specific relationships and moments. Motivation grows when learners feel recognised and respected, but decreases when they feel judged or ignored.

Power also plays a major role. Darvin and Norton (2021) show that learners' access to participation and legitimacy is unequally distributed. Learners from marginalised groups may face discrimination or exclusion, which reduces their sense of agency and motivation. In such cases, motivation becomes a political issue, shaped by opportunities and inequalities rather than personal desire alone.

For international students, migrants and refugees, these issues are especially important. Their motivation is influenced by immigration policies, financial pressure, cultural adjustment and social dynamics. A supportive environment can transform extrinsic pressure into genuine engagement, while hostile environments can undermine even strong motivation.

Overall, sociocultural and ecological perspectives highlight that motivation is not simply inside the learner. It emerges through relationships, interactions and opportunities in the broader social world.

Identity, Investment and Poststructural Perspectives

Poststructural theories shift the focus from internal psychology to identity, power and social positioning. These perspectives argue that motivation depends on how learners are recognised, valued or marginalised in different contexts.

Norton's concept of investment (1995, 2000, 2013) is central to this approach. Investment asks not whether a learner is motivated, but under what conditions they choose to participate and what identity-related benefits they expect to gain. Learners engage when participation supports their identity and withdraw when it threatens their dignity or legitimacy.

Chick's (1996) research in South Africa shows that silence can be a protective response to power imbalances, not a lack of motivation. Learners who feel their accents or backgrounds are undervalued may remain quiet to protect their identity. Identity is also connected to future visions. Dornyei's L2 Motivational Self System argues that learners are motivated by imagined future selves. However, not all learners have equal access to realising these identities. Those who face racism, accent discrimination or social exclusion may struggle to develop or maintain their ideal second language selves.

Darvin and Norton (2015, 2021) highlight how ideology and capital shape learners' opportunities. Students who possess valued forms of linguistic or cultural capital may gain confidence, while others may lose motivation if their contributions are not recognised. Emotions also play a central role. Positive experiences can strengthen motivation, while humiliation or exclusion can severely damage it.

For many international and migrant learners, identity negotiations are directly tied to survival, belonging and legitimacy. In these cases, motivation is inseparable from social conditions.

Contemporary Developments in Motivation Research

Recent research views motivation as complex, dynamic and shaped by changing psychological, social and material conditions. Three major developments include:

a. Complex Dynamic Systems Theory (CDST)

CDST views motivation as constantly shifting and influenced by many interacting factors (Hiver & Al-Hoorie, 2020). Small changes in mood, classroom climate or social relationships can create major shifts in motivation. This perspective encourages longitudinal and qualitative methods to study how motivation evolves.

b. Directed Motivational Currents (DMCs)

DMCs are intense periods of strong, long-term motivation (Dornyei, Henry & Muir, 2016). They show how intrinsic and extrinsic motives can combine into powerful engagement, especially when linked to meaningful goals like exam preparation or study abroad.

c. Digital Learning Environments

Digital platforms provide new opportunities for authentic communication and identity development (Lai, 2017). They can support intrinsic motivation when learners engage creatively or socially in the target language. However, digital inequalities and power relations can also limit participation.

d. Globalisation and Mobility

Learners today often imagine multilingual, transnational identities (Kano & Norton, 2019). Motivation is influenced not only by local communities but by global aspirations, visa pressures, labour markets, and online participation.

Overall, contemporary research sees motivation as an evolving system rather than a fixed trait.

Pedagogical Implications

Modern theories of motivation show that effective teaching is not just about using motivational techniques. Instead, teachers must create conditions that support autonomy, competence, relatedness and identity.

Autonomy posits that learners are more motivated when they feel a sense of choice and ownership. Even small decisions, such as choosing topics or setting goals, can support autonomy. Teachers should explain the purpose of tasks, so learners see their value.

Competence is also essential, as motivation increases when learners feel capable of success. This requires well-sequenced tasks, constructive feedback and opportunities for successful communication. Collaborative activities can also help learners build confidence. Similarly, a positive classroom climate is essential. Learners need to feel respected and emotionally safe. Supportive relationships reduce anxiety and encourage participation. Post-structural perspectives show that learners may withdraw if they feel their identity is undervalued. Teachers should avoid deficit perspectives, validate multilingual identities, and ensure all voices are heard.

Digital tools can support motivation, but teachers must ensure equal access and help learners develop digital literacy. In addition, assessment should support growth rather than create fear. Formative feedback, self-assessment and learning portfolios can help learners recognise progress and internalise extrinsic goals.

Overall, pedagogy should treat learners as whole individuals with complex identities and social experiences. When learners feel valued, capable and connected, motivation becomes stronger and more sustainable.

Conclusion

Contemporary research in SLA shows that motivation is not a fixed personality trait but a dynamic process influenced by many psychological, social and cultural factors. Earlier theories often separated motivation into intrinsic versus extrinsic categories or viewed it as something located only inside the learner. However, modern perspectives show that motivation develops through experiences, emotions, relationships and opportunities in the learning environment.

Intrinsic and extrinsic motivations interact with each other continuously. Extrinsic motivation can become internalised when learners feel autonomy, competence and relatedness. At the same time, intrinsic interest can only grow when learners feel supported, respected and able to participate safely. Motivation rises and falls depending on moment-to-moment experiences, long-term goals and the opportunities available in learners' social worlds.

Sociocultural, ecological and post-structural perspectives highlight the importance of identity, power and access to participation. Motivation depends not only on learners' desires but also on whether they feel recognised and valued as legitimate second language users. For many international students, migrants and refugees, motivation is connected to structural pressures such as immigration rules, academic expectations and labour market demands. In these contexts, extrinsic motivation is not a weakness but a reflection of real-life conditions.

Digital environments, globalisation and transnational mobility have further expanded the ways learners imagine their future identities and communities. As a result, learners now draw motivation from local and global contexts, both offline and online.

These developments carry important implications for teaching. Effective pedagogy requires environments that support autonomy, competence and relatedness, and that recognise the diverse identities and experiences learners bring to the classroom. Teachers must consider how classroom practices, assessment, relationships and institutional structures influence learners' willingness to participate and invest in language learning. When learners feel safe, valued and capable, motivation can flourish and lead to meaningful, long-term engagement.

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