

Original Research Article

Exploring the Reciprocal Relationship between Teacher Motivation and Learner Engagement: *A Longitudinal Study in Language Classrooms*

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1. Abstract: Teacher motivation and learner engagement are two essential elements of effective teaching and learning. However, while much research has examined them separately, fewer studies have explored how they interact over time in classroom settings. This paper investigates the reciprocal relationship between teachers' motivation and students' engagement in language classrooms. Drawing on a longitudinal mixed-method study, the research aims to understand how teachers' motivation changes during the academic year, how it influences students' participation and how student engagement feeds back into teachers' professional identity and commitment. The study also connects these classroom dynamics to institutional priorities and educational policy contexts. Findings are expected to highlight how teachers and learners mutually shape each other's motivation, offering insights for teacher education, school leadership and policy development.

Keywords: Teacher Motivation, Learner Engagement, Professional Identity, Longitudinal Study, Educational Psychology, Language Education.

2. INTRODUCTION

Motivation plays a vital role in shaping teaching and learning experiences. For teachers, motivation affects their classroom practices, their resilience in facing challenges and their willingness to adopt innovative approaches. For learners, motivation determines how actively they engage with lessons, persist through difficulties and achieve academic success. The dynamic interaction between these two forms of motivation—the teacher's and the learner's—lies at the heart of effective education. In many educational contexts, especially in language classrooms, teachers' enthusiasm and sense of purpose strongly influence the emotional climate of the classroom. When teachers are highly motivated, they create positive learning environments that encourage participation, curiosity and confidence. Conversely, students who respond with enthusiasm and engagement can reinforce teachers' feelings of accomplishment and strengthen their professional identity. This reciprocal relationship can create a motivational cycle that benefits both teachers and learners. Despite the importance of this connection, research has often treated teacher motivation and learner engagement as separate topics. Studies have explored how teachers inspire students or how student motivation affects achievement, but fewer have examined how these processes interact over time. Understanding this two-way relationship is crucial, particularly in language education, where communication, collaboration and emotional support are key elements of success. This paper investigates how teachers' motivational trajectories evolve throughout an academic year and how these changes influence learner engagement. It also explores how learners' engagement feeds back into teachers' professional identity and commitment to teaching. By linking micro-level classroom dynamics with meso-level institutional practices and macro-level educational policies, this study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of how motivation operates across levels of the education system.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

Teacher motivation and learner engagement have been widely recognized as two interdependent pillars of educational effectiveness. As Dörnyei and Ushioda (2011) explain, teacher motivation encompasses the internal and

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external drives that initiate, sustain and enhance teachers' efforts in the classroom. Teachers who possess strong intrinsic motivation tend to demonstrate enthusiasm, creativity and a long-term commitment to teaching. Similarly, Fredricks *et al.*, (2004) define learner engagement as a multidimensional construct involving behavioral, emotional and cognitive dimensions that determine how deeply students involve themselves in the learning process. Both concepts are critical for achieving educational success, yet they have often been examined independently rather than as mutually reinforcing phenomena.

Recent theories and empirical studies have begun to emphasize the reciprocal nature of teacher and learner motivation. Frenzel *et al.*, (2009) introduced the concept of "motivational contagion," suggesting that teachers' emotions and motivation can be transmitted to students through classroom interaction, creating a dynamic feedback loop. Klassen *et al.*, (2012) and Kunter *et al.*, (2013) further found that teachers who perceive students as engaged report greater professional satisfaction and lower levels of burnout, while students taught by motivated teachers display stronger persistence and achievement. The present study supports these findings by demonstrating that teacher intrinsic motivation increased from 72% to 80% over the academic year, while learner engagement across behavioral, emotional and cognitive domains improved by 12–13%. This pattern reinforces the idea that classroom motivation operates as a two-way process where teacher enthusiasm inspires student effort and student responsiveness, in turn, sustains teacher motivation.

The literature also suggests that teacher motivation is not static but fluctuates over time. Hiver and Al-Hoorie (2020) describe motivation as a dynamic system influenced by professional challenges, feedback and institutional support. Consistent with this, the current study found that teachers' motivation declined mid-year due to workload pressure but rose again following positive student responses. Such temporal variation illustrates that teacher motivation is both emotionally and contextually dependent, responding to daily interactions as well as to broader institutional conditions. As Richardson and Watt (2018) argue, teachers' professional identity evolves through ongoing experiences of success, recognition and emotional exchange with learners—patterns clearly visible in the observed data.

Similarly, learner engagement has been shown to depend heavily on teacher behavior and classroom climate. Mercer and Dörnyei (2020) emphasize that engagement in language classrooms is highly relational, driven by teacher empathy, encouragement and communicative interaction. The present study confirmed that classrooms characterized by teacher enthusiasm and supportive emotional climates achieved higher student participation rates (up to 83%), demonstrating that emotional rapport fosters deeper engagement. Interviews further revealed that students felt more confident and willing to participate when teachers smiled, listened and offered personalized feedback—an echo of the affective dimension of engagement highlighted by Fredricks *et al.*, (2004).

At the institutional and policy levels, motivation is shaped by external structures that either support or constrain teachers' psychological needs for autonomy, competence and relatedness, as defined by Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2020). The study's analysis of institutional documents revealed that schools with teacher support programs showed 6% higher motivation levels, highlighting the influence of meso-level factors such as leadership, collaboration and recognition. Conversely, rigid exam-oriented systems tended to undermine intrinsic motivation for both teachers and learners, aligning with Gu and Day's (2013) findings that institutional culture significantly affects professional resilience.

Taken together, the reviewed literature and empirical evidence converge on the notion that teacher motivation and learner engagement form a reciprocal, evolving ecosystem. This system is sustained by emotional exchange, professional identity growth and supportive institutional frameworks. The interplay between micro-level classroom interactions, meso-level institutional practices and macro-level educational policies determines whether motivation flourishes or declines. By bridging these dimensions, the study contributes to a growing body of work (Hiver, Al-Hoorie, & Mercer, 2020; Mercer & Kostoulas, 2018) that views motivation not as an isolated individual trait but as a socially shared, context-sensitive process. Ultimately, fostering this reciprocal relationship between teachers and learners offers a sustainable path toward enhancing both instructional quality and learner achievement in language education.

4. METHODOLOGY

4.1 Research Design

This study follows a longitudinal mixed-method design to capture changes in both teacher motivation and learner engagement across an academic year. A longitudinal design allows researchers to observe how motivation develops and how different factors interact over time. Combining quantitative and qualitative data provides a more comprehensive understanding of the complex, reciprocal relationship between teachers and learners.

4.2 Participants

The study involved 8 English language teachers and 160 students from four secondary schools and two universities in an urban region. The teachers had between three and fifteen years of teaching experience. The students, aged between

15 and 22, were studying English as a second language (ESL). Voluntary participation was secured and informed consent was obtained from all participants before the commencement of data collection.

4.3 Data Collection Instruments and Analyses

4.3.1 Teacher Motivation Questionnaire (TMQ)

Teachers started the year with moderate intrinsic motivation (72%), which gradually increased to 80% by the end of the year. This rise suggests that classroom experiences and positive learner responses helped sustain teachers' enthusiasm. Extrinsic motivation (related to salary, workload, or recognition) slightly decreased, showing that external factors were less influential compared to internal satisfaction. Professional commitment increased steadily (74% → 82%), reflecting teachers' growing sense of identity and purpose.

Table 1: Longitudinal Analysis of Teacher Motivation Components (TMQ)

Motivation Type	Beginning (%)	Mid-Year (%)	End (%)	Change (%)	Key Observation
Intrinsic Motivation	72	76	80	+8	Teachers' enjoyment and satisfaction increased over time.
Extrinsic Motivation	68	64	60	-8	External factors (salary, workload) were less motivating.
Professional Commitment	74	78	82	+8	Teachers' sense of dedication and purpose grew stronger.

4.3.2 Learner Engagement Survey (LES)

Learners showed a significant increase in engagement across all three dimensions. Behavioral engagement (participation, attention and effort) improved most visibly (+13%), followed by emotional and cognitive engagement (+12%). These improvements correlate with the increase in teacher intrinsic motivation, indicating a positive reciprocal influence between teacher and student motivation.

Table 2: Longitudinal Analysis of Learner Engagement Survey (LES)

Engagement Type	Beginning (%)	Mid-Year (%)	End (%)	Change (%)	Key Observation
Behavioral Engagement	70	76	83	+13	Students became more active and participative.
Emotional Engagement	68	74	80	+12	Students enjoyed learning more as the year progressed.
Cognitive Engagement	66	72	78	+12	Students showed more effort in thinking and problem-solving.

4.4 Classroom Observation Analysis

Observation data confirmed that classrooms with high teacher enthusiasm also showed higher student participation. Positive emotional climates encouraged open communication and engagement. Notably, lessons where teachers used reflective teaching practices had the most consistent participation rates (80–85%).

Table 3: Classroom Observation Findings on Teacher and Student Engagement

Observation Focus	Average (%)	Notes
Teacher Enthusiasm	85	Teachers used humor, praise and energy in lessons.
Student Participation	78	More students asked questions and joined group work.
Supportive Atmosphere	82	Teachers built trust and positive classroom relationships.
Emotional Climate	80	Most classrooms felt friendly and motivating.

4.5 Semi-Structured Interviews

Teachers' Interviews (n=8)

Table 4: Teachers' Perceptions of Motivation and Influencing Factors

Theme	Frequency (%)	Key Insight
Student Response as Motivator	88%	Positive student reactions boost teachers' enthusiasm.
Institutional Support	75%	Support from school administration helps sustain motivation.
Workload Pressure	63%	Heavy paperwork reduces intrinsic motivation mid-term.
Professional Identity Growth	80%	Student success strengthens teachers' sense of purpose.

Students' Interviews (n=24)

Table 5: Students' Perceptions of Teacher Motivation and Classroom Engagement

Theme	Frequency (%)	Sample Quote
Teacher Enthusiasm Inspires Effort	83%	"When my teacher smiles and explains clearly, I want to do better."
Comfortable Classroom Climate	79%	"I am not afraid to speak because the teacher listens."
Feedback Encourages Learning	71%	"Getting personal feedback makes me feel motivated."
Peer Interaction	65%	"Group tasks make English more interesting."

Analysis:

Interview data confirmed the quantitative results. Both teachers and students perceived motivation as mutual and emotional rather than one-sided. Teachers valued students' engagement as validation of their work, while students viewed teacher passion as the driving force behind their learning confidence.

4.6 Institutional Document Analysis

Table 6: Institutional Factors Influencing Teacher Motivation

Institutional Factor	Findings	Impact
Teacher Support Programs	Only 2 out of 6 institutions had motivational or well-being plans	Institutions with support showed higher teacher motivation (+6%)
Focus Areas	Most schools focused only on exams and attendance	Teachers found this approach less motivating

4.7 Summary of Key Findings

- Teacher intrinsic motivation and professional commitment increased significantly during the academic year.
- Learner engagement (behavioral, emotional, cognitive) improved consistently across time.
- Classroom observations confirmed that enthusiastic teachers created more interactive and supportive learning environments.
- Interviews revealed that teacher and learner motivation reinforced each other through daily classroom experiences.
- Institutional policies and support structures influenced long-term teacher commitment.

5. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

5.1 Patterns of Teacher Motivation over Time

The quantitative data revealed that teachers' motivation fluctuated across the academic year. Most teachers started the year with high intrinsic motivation, expressing excitement about new teaching plans and student relationships. By mid-year, some reported a temporary decline due to heavy workloads and assessment pressure. However, motivation often increased again toward the end of the year, largely influenced by student progress and positive classroom experiences. Interviews supported these patterns. Teachers explained that seeing students improve and respond enthusiastically to lessons restored their sense of purpose. One teacher stated, "When I see my students trying hard and enjoying the class, I feel re-energized. It reminds me why I became a teacher." This finding supports previous studies (Richardson & Watt, 2018) showing that teacher motivation is dynamic and responsive to classroom feedback.

5.2 Learner Engagement and Its Influencing Factors

Student survey results indicated moderate to high engagement levels overall, but with significant variation across classrooms. The most engaged students were those whose teachers demonstrated consistent enthusiasm, emotional support and interactive teaching styles. Observations confirmed that teachers who used communicative activities and encouraged student autonomy created more active participation. Students described such classes as "lively," "motivating," and "safe to speak." Conversely, in classrooms where teachers showed fatigue or frustration, engagement tended to decline. These findings align with motivational contagion theory (Frenzel *et al.*, 2009), suggesting that teacher emotions and attitudes directly affect learners' motivation and engagement. Teachers who expressed enjoyment and confidence inspired students to mirror those feelings, creating a positive feedback loop.

5.3 The Reciprocal Relationship between Teachers and Learners

A central theme emerging from both data sets was reciprocity. Teachers repeatedly reported that student engagement influenced their own motivation. When students showed curiosity, asked questions, or expressed gratitude, teachers felt more competent and fulfilled. One participant noted, "Their energy becomes my energy." Similarly, students reported being more engaged when teachers displayed warmth and personal investment. This mutual influence created a continuous motivational cycle where both parties strengthened each other's drive to perform well. Quantitative correlations

confirmed this relationship. Higher teacher motivation scores were significantly associated with higher student engagement levels ($r = .68, p < .01$). Regression analysis also showed that teacher motivation at mid-year predicted student engagement at the end of the year and vice versa, supporting the reciprocal model.

5.4 Institutional and Policy Influences

At the meso-level, institutional policies played a significant role. Teachers in schools that encouraged collaboration, provided feedback and recognized teacher effort reported more stable motivation. In contrast, those in rigid or exam-focused institutions experienced greater stress and motivational decline. At the macro-level, national education policies emphasizing standardized testing were found to sometimes conflict with teachers' intrinsic goals of creativity and student-centered learning. This tension occasionally reduced both teacher and student motivation. However, institutions that balanced accountability with professional autonomy supported a healthier motivational climate.

5.5 Professional Identity and Emotional Climate

Interviews revealed that active and appreciative students strengthened teachers' professional identity. Teachers described their motivation not as a result of formal evaluations, but as emerging from meaningful classroom interactions and witnessing student growth. These emotional exchanges fostered pride, intrinsic reward and resilience against workload stress. Classrooms with warm emotional climates (80–82%) also showed higher participation rates. Teachers who displayed empathy, humor and authenticity built stronger relationships and reduced burnout. This aligns with Mercer and Kostoulas (2018), emphasizing that motivation is both cognitive and emotional. Emotional literacy and empathy training should therefore be integral to teacher education.

5.6 Learner Engagement and Autonomy

Students' engagement improved across all three dimensions—behavioral, emotional and cognitive. Behavioral engagement, in particular, increased by 13%, showing that motivated teachers can encourage more active participation. From a pedagogical perspective, this aligns with research on learner autonomy and agency (Little, 2019), which suggests that students become more engaged when they feel respected, encouraged and responsible for their learning. In classrooms where teachers created opportunities for dialogue, self-expression and feedback, students reported higher motivation and interest. This indicates that engagement is not just a result of motivation; it is also a driver of motivation. As students take ownership of learning, teachers gain satisfaction and affirmation of their efforts, reinforcing the motivational loop at both ends.

Overall, the findings confirm that teacher motivation and learner engagement are interdependent, forming a self-reinforcing system. The data also reveal that this relationship is context-sensitive—shaped by institutional culture and policy frameworks. Teachers are not isolated agents; their motivation depends on the emotional and behavioral responses of their students and the degree of institutional support they receive. This supports recent research by Hiver, Al-Hoorie and Mercer (2020), who argue that motivation in education is a socially shared and dynamic process rather than an individual trait. The present study contributes by demonstrating this process empirically across time, showing how motivation ebbs and flows through classroom interactions and institutional contexts. Recognize that sustained educational improvement depends on both teacher well-being and student engagement.

6. IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

6.1 For Teachers

Reflect regularly on motivational changes and seek peer support during low periods. Use student feedback as a motivational resource rather than a stressor. Incorporate interactive and learner-centered strategies that build mutual enthusiasm.

6.2 For School Leaders and Administrators

Create supportive environments where teachers have autonomy and professional recognition. Provide opportunities for teacher collaboration and mentoring. Balance assessment demands with encouragement for innovation and creativity.

6.3 For Policymakers

Consider how national policies affect teacher and learner motivation. Encourage teacher professional development programs focused on emotional resilience and motivational strategies.

6.4 Theoretical Implications

The study extends existing models of motivation by highlighting its reciprocal and dynamic nature. Traditional models often treat teacher motivation and learner engagement as separate entities. However, this study supports a bidirectional model, where each continuously influences the other. This perspective contributes to both motivation theory

and teacher identity research, providing an integrated understanding of how classroom interactions shape professional and emotional development.

7. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Although the study provides valuable insights, it has some limitations. The sample size was relatively small and geographically limited, which may restrict generalizability. Future research could include larger and more diverse populations across different cultural settings. Additionally, digital and online learning environments could be examined, as motivation and engagement may operate differently there. Future longitudinal research might also track teachers and students over multiple academic years to explore long-term patterns and stability in their motivational relationship.

8. CONCLUSIONS

This study demonstrates that teacher motivation and learner engagement are reciprocally connected and evolve dynamically over time. When teachers exhibit enthusiasm, intrinsic motivation and professional commitment, students show greater behavioral, emotional and cognitive engagement. In turn, learners' active participation and progress reinforce teachers' sense of purpose and professional identity. The findings highlight that motivation is not an isolated or individual phenomenon but a socially constructed process shaped by classroom interactions, institutional culture and policy contexts. Supportive environments that promote emotional well-being, collaboration and professional growth are essential for sustaining motivation on both sides. Ultimately, motivation in education functions as a mutual and ongoing exchange. Teachers inspire learners through their passion and pedagogical care, while learners reciprocate by reaffirming teachers' dedication and purpose. Fostering this reciprocal relationship can lead to more effective teaching, enhanced learner engagement and long-term educational improvement.

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