

Students' Motivation, Language Practices, and Classroom Interaction in Nepali EFL Contexts

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Abstract

This article examines students' motivation in English Language Learning (ELL) with a particular attention to how motivation affects learners' engagement with language forms, functions, and classroom communication practices in English as Foreign Language (EFL) context of Nepal. Following an interpretivist, qualitative paradigm, data were gathered through focus group discussions with fifteen secondary students and semi-structured in-depth-interviews with five English teachers in selected schools within Kathmandu Valley. Thematic analysis reveals that student motivation is primarily shaped by teacher behaviour, classroom environment, pedagogical strategies, and the perceived relevance of English to future goals. Students report higher motivation through supportive teacher–student relationships, interactive activities, and literature-based tasks, while lecture-based instruction, punitive responses to errors, and limited engaging resources contribute to demotivation. Interactive and literature-based activities enhanced not only motivation but also meaningful language use and communicative participation. Although teachers demonstrate theoretical awareness of effective motivational strategies, they report structural constraints arising from large class sizes, heavy workloads, and a rigid, exam-oriented curriculum. The findings highlight a clear gap between theoretical understanding of motivation and its practical classroom application. The article concludes that improving motivation in ELT requires a dual approach combining student-centred pedagogical practices with institutional reforms to address systemic challenges.

Keywords: student motivation, English Language Learning (ELL), motivational strategies, classroom environment, learning achievement

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Introduction

Language learning is not simply the acquisition of grammatical structures but as process of developing the ability to use language meaningfully in social contexts. In EFL classrooms, learners engage with language at multiple levels including form, meaning, and use. Motivation plays a crucial role in determining the extent to which learners actively participate in communication practices, negotiate meaning, and develop linguistic competence. Thus, understanding student motivation also requires examining how learners interact with language as a system and as a medium of communication. In the 21st century, the ability to communicate effectively in English has become essential to academic, professional, and personal success.

As the global language of business, science, and technology, mastering English opens new horizons of opportunity. However, sustaining motivation throughout the language learning process remains a major challenge, particularly in EFL settings like Nepal where learners have limited exposure to English outside the classroom (Poudel, 2021). Highly motivated students are more engaged, persevere with difficulty, and achieve higher levels of proficiency (Guilloteaux & Dörnyei, 2008).

In the Nepali EFL context, many students experience low motivation owing to traditional teaching practices, examination pressure, and a perceived disconnect between classroom English and real-life relevance. Motivation is widely recognised as a key determinant of learning success, shaping learners' engagement, persistence, and language proficiency (Dörnyei, 2001). To address this, teachers must be equipped with strategies that foster intrinsic motivation, including diverse learning activities, engaging materials, and responsive feedback. By creating a supportive, stimulating environment and building positive relationships with students, teachers can sustain motivation and improve English proficiency.

Adhikari et al. (2025) present motivation as a fundamental psychological construct that drives individuals to act and achieve their goals, emphasising that teacher strategies and classroom design significantly influence learners' motivational orientations. Gabriel and Fowler (2025) similarly demonstrate that structured learning environments emphasising student initiative, goal-oriented conversation, and process over outcome foster more resilient and engaged learners. The present study, therefore, explores practical and context-sensitive ways English teachers can enhance student motivation in secondary EFL classrooms in Nepal.

English language learning in EFL contexts like Nepal remains challenging due to limited exposure, traditional teaching practices, and reduced learner motivation. Research indicates

that Nepalese EFL classrooms frequently struggle to provide engaging, learner-centred experiences that promote autonomy and sustained motivation (Poudel, 2021). This limits students' confidence, reduces active involvement, and adversely affects overall language proficiency.

Despite the recognised importance of motivation, a significant gap remains in understanding how teachers can apply effective motivational strategies in everyday EFL classrooms. Studies show that motivation improves when teachers provide supportive, meaningful, and interactive learning environments (Deci & Ryan, 1985), yet such practices are not consistently implemented. Very few studies in the Nepali secondary context examine the specific motivational strategies teachers use and their direct effect on student engagement. The present study aims to address these gaps by exploring: (a) to identify the most effective motivational strategies in learning English at the secondary level and (b) to examine the role of the teacher in enhancing students' motivation in EFL classrooms.

Motivation is widely recognised as a crucial factor in successful language learning. According to Brown (2007, p. 45), motivation refers to the extent to which learners make choices about goals to pursue and the effort they devote to achieving those goals. In the context of ELT, motivation plays a decisive role because language learning requires continuous practice, active participation, and willingness to communicate (Dörnyei, 2001). Motivation not only drives learning effort but also shapes learners' engagement with language itself, influencing their willingness to communicate, experiment with linguistic forms and participate in meaning making. At the secondary level, adolescents' academic pressure, examination stress, and emotional changes directly influence their learning behaviour. Gardner (2010) emphasises that motivation is a key determinant of success in second language learning, particularly during

the formative years of schooling. In Nepalese secondary schools, English is both a compulsory subject and a gateway to higher education and employment; therefore, sustaining motivation is essential for improving learning outcomes.

Deci and Ryan (1985) distinguish intrinsic motivation (learning for personal interest and satisfaction) from extrinsic motivation (learning for grades, employment, or social recognition). At the secondary level, students are frequently influenced by extrinsic factors such as the Secondary Education Examination (SEE) and parental expectations. Gardner (1985) elaborates the concepts of integrative motivation (desire to integrate with target language culture) and instrumental motivation (practical goals such as passing examinations or obtaining employment). In the Nepalese context, instrumental motivation is particularly dominant, as English is perceived as an essential tool for academic success and global communication. Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000) further specifies that learners are most motivated when they experience autonomy, competence, and relatedness three basic psychological needs whose fulfilment in the classroom strengthens engagement.

Student motivation is influenced by multiple interrelated factors. Teacher-related factors play a central role: Dörnyei (2001) argues that teacher behaviour, teaching style, and classroom practices significantly shape learners' motivation. Harmer (2007) further emphasises that a supportive and interactive classroom environment encourages learners to take risks in using the target language. Learner-related factors such as interest, self-confidence, and anxiety also contribute, as Brown (2007) observes that learners with positive self-perception and prior success are more motivated than those who have experienced repeated failure.

Teachers act not only as instructors but as facilitators and motivators (Dörnyei, 2001). Creating a supportive, respectful classroom environment helps students feel confident and

willing to use English without fear of making mistakes. Harmer (2007) emphasises that motivated teachers often produce motivated learners. Gardner's (1985) socio-educational model highlights positive attitudes toward the language as an enhancer of motivation, while Dörnyei's (2005, 2009) L2 Motivational Self System links motivation to learners' self-concept specifically the Ideal L2 Self, Ought-to L2 Self, and L2 Learning Experience. Krashen's (1982) Affective Filter Hypothesis underscores the importance of low-anxiety, emotionally supportive environments, and Vygotsky's (1978) Sociocultural Theory situates motivation within social interaction, scaffolding, and the Zone of Proximal Development.

Several studies have been undertaking in the area of motivation and affecting factors to learners' motivation. Poudel (2019) found that secondary students in Nepal were more motivated when teachers used learner-centred teaching, interactive activities, and positive feedback, while heavy examination focus and rote learning reduced intrinsic motivation. Poudel (2022) demonstrated that story-based teaching significantly enhanced students' motivation and engagement in reading English, though qualitative student voice data remained limited. Saheb (2015) established that EFL students are predominantly instrumentally motivated, learning English mainly for examinations, employment, and future opportunities, with teachers' support and technology use further increasing motivation. Hoody and Trey (2020) found that emotionally responsive, supportive teachers produced more motivated and confident learners, and that motivation fluctuates dynamically with classroom interaction. Rahman et al. (2022) identified group work, praise, goal setting, learner autonomy, and interactive activities as key motivational strategies, noting that cultural and institutional contexts shape their effectiveness. Kafle (2023) observed that large class size, examination pressure, and limited teaching materials reduced motivation in Nepali secondary classrooms, though teachers who used

encouragement and real-life examples-maintained student interest despite difficult conditions.

Collectively, these studies confirm that teacher behaviour is central to motivation, that instrumental orientation dominates in EFL settings like Nepal, and that structural constraints impede consistent implementation of motivational strategies. However, gaps remain: most studies do not identify specific strategies used regularly, comparative analysis linking teacher practices directly to student outcomes is limited, and student voice documenting precise motivational mechanisms is underrepresented in the Nepali context. The present study addresses these gaps through rich qualitative data from both students and teachers.

Methods

This study adopted an interpretivist (constructivist) paradigm, framing student motivation and their experiences of engaging with English language practices in the classroom as a complex, socially constructed, and individually experienced phenomenon (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Accordingly, a qualitative research design was employed, enabling exploration of students lived experiences and perceptions in authentic classroom contexts with a depth that quantitative instruments could not adequately capture. The study was conducted in selected secondary schools within Kathmandu Valley, Nepal, focusing on Grades 11 and 12, where students were actively preparing for the high-stakes NEB. The sample comprised fifteen secondary-level students and five English teachers, selected through purposive sampling to ensure participants could provide rich, contextually grounded information.

Data were collected through focus group discussions (FGDs) with students and semi-structured interviews with teachers, supplemented by smartphone audio recordings and a researcher's reflective diary. Secondary data from academic literature and school documents supported theoretical triangulation. Data collection proceeded through systematic stages encompassing informed

consent, rapport-building, audio-recorded sessions with concurrent field notes, and participant acknowledgment. The collected data were analysed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), progressing from verbatim transcription and systematic coding to the construction of broader thematic patterns illustrated by participant quotations. Findings were interpreted through the theoretical lenses of Gardner's (1985) Socio-Educational Model, Deci and Ryan's (1985, 2000) Self-Determination Theory, and Dörnyei's (2005, 2009) L2 Motivational Self System. Ethical rigour was maintained via voluntary informed consent, pseudonymisation, participant confidentiality, the right to withdraw, and minimisation of potential harm.

Results and Discussion

The participants of the study shared their activities and feelings of learning English with the support of teachers. They expressed their joys as well as challenges in getting ideas expressed in English texts. The information solicited through interview have been discussed here developing appropriate theme generated from the responses provided.

Joy of Learning English

The students had amazing yet challenging experiences of learning English. They expressed mixed feelings about learning English, revealing a complex emotional aspect. Though learning is affected by language complexity and the nature of input given, the participated students articulated extreme joys, often linked to teacher support and perceived relevance. One student stated: “[bidesh jindabaad], I want to go to a foreign country; English is important for human life.” This response demonstrates how joy emerges when students see clear connections between learning and life goals, confirming Saheb's (2015) finding of predominantly instrumental motivation while adding the crucial dimension of teacher influence in sustaining that motivation. The emotional dimension deepened when students described teacher relationships:

“Teacher treat us like own child; his nature is very good like a gentleman [mero sir mero pran].” The Nepali phrase — meaning “my teacher is my life” reveals profound affective attachment, showing that joy in learning emerges from quality human relationships. This aligns with Self-Determination Theory’s emphasis on relatedness as a basic psychological need (Deci & Ryan, 2000) and extends Poudel’s (2019) findings by revealing that, in the Nepali context, affective bonds operate at an almost familial level.

However, barriers prevented consistent joy. Some students reported: “Not interesting due to its language complexity” and “It is boring due to very hard subject.” These responses reflect learner’s struggle with linguistic complexity. It indicates that motivation is closely tied to the accessibility of language input. The data also projects how content exceeding comprehensibility without scaffolding replaces joy with frustration, contrasting with the more positive outcomes in Poudel’s (2022) story-based teaching study. The finding supports Vygotsky’s (1978) Zone of Proximal Development: learning is most motivating when challenge is calibrated to just beyond current ability with appropriate teacher support.

Enjoyable English Classes and Activities

Students described enjoyable moments using vivid language indicating deep psychological engagement. One stated: “It’s amazing (I can’t explain it). It makes me interested when I read poems, one-act plays, and short stories.” Another characterised enjoyable classes as: “Very energetic, funny, happy, joyful, curious, excited.” Literature-based activities poems, plays, stories emerged as powerful motivators, directly supporting Poudel’s (2022) research and extending it to reveal that poems and one-act plays generate similarly high levels of engagement. Teachers, however, tend to treat these as occasional rather than central activities due to syllabus pressure, revealing that enjoyment is pedagogically created and requires systematic integration rather than sporadic use.

Contrasting experiences also appeared: “It’s exciting but [kahile kahi jhyeu lagchha]” (sometimes it becomes tedious). This finding supports Kafle’s (2023) observation that limited teaching materials reduced motivation, while adding that even well-designed activities lose motivational power when difficulty exceeds capability without scaffolding, consistent with Krashen’s (1982) concept of comprehensible input. The data infer that literature-based activities provided exposure to authentic language use, enabling learners to engage with discourse-level meaning rather than isolated grammatical forms.

Teacher’s Role in Building Interest and Confidence

Teacher explanations and interactive practices facilitated both comprehensible input and opportunities for language output, which are essential for language development. Students repeatedly identified teacher behaviours as critical determinants of their learning experience. One stated: “Many students enjoy English class when the teacher explains poems, stories, and one-act plays.” Another revealed: “I really enjoyed listening carefully. I think just listening carefully makes English better.” These findings align with Harmer’s (2007) assertion that supportive environments encourage learners to take risks and Rahman et al.’s (2022) identification of interactive activities as motivational. However, problematic practices also emerged: “(Teacher just reads, not speaks and writes)” revealing that students recognise effective teaching demands explanation and multiple representations, not merely transmission. Most strikingly, one student admitted: “(A time I really enjoyed English class was when the teacher was absent, because at that time we got time to play games on the ground).” When students prefer teacher absence, it signals the teacher has become associated with constraint and boredom rather than learning and joy, contrasting sharply with Hoody and Trey’s (2020) finding of supportive teacher effects.

Classroom Activities and Participation

Students demonstrated sophisticated understanding that activities influence motivation dynamically. One stated: “Classroom activities help to motivate study, build confidence, engage in more activities.” Another appreciated: “Teach us very richly, motivates, encourages, presents excellent behaviour.” These preferences align strongly with Rahman et al.’s (2022) finding that group work, praise, goal setting, and interactive activities promoted communicative use of language, allowing learners to negotiate meaning and develop fluency. Significant frustration emerged from the data, however, regarding the gap between desired and actual practice, consistent with Kafle’s (2023) observations. Notably, one student remarked: “*Chat GPT vaye sir ni चाहिदैन*” “when AI tools like Chat GPT are available, there is no need for teachers”, [P2] revealing an extreme form of AI dependency that signals profound disengagement from the pedagogical relationship.

Feelings About Making Mistakes

Students’ negative reactions to errors hinder interlanguage development, as learners become reluctant to experiment with linguistic forms. The teachers described intensely negative experiences: “Students feel nervous, dishonest, guilty, disappointed.” The situation became more alarming with accounts of punitive responses: “Our teacher scolds us, sometimes beats us; that time I feel nervous.” Physical punishment for linguistic errors is both pedagogically ineffective and psychologically harmful, contrasting dramatically with Hoody and Trey’s (2020) supportive teacher model and Harmer’s (2007) emphasis on creating low-anxiety environments. These practices create the high affective filter that Krashen (1982) identifies as blocking language acquisition. However, contrasting attitudes appeared: “I don’t feel nervous because (mistake makes people perfect).” Students with this growth mindset view errors as natural learning steps aligned with contemporary understanding of hypothesis testing in language acquisition (Ellis, 2005).

Relevance of English to Life and Future

Students’ perception of English as a global language reflects its role as linguistic capital in transnational communication in the era of globalization. Their motivation was influenced by perceived relevance to life goals. Many articulated: “English is an international language” and “(I want to go abroad); English is important for my future and career.” These statements confirm Gardner’s (1985) concept of instrumental motivation and align with Saheb’s (2015) research, showing students learn English primarily for future opportunities. In Nepal, where foreign employment represents a major economic pathway, instrumental motivation dominates. However, not all students experienced English as personally relevant: [Government of Nepal made English compulsory]; we are obliged to learn.” When learning stems from obligatory compliance rather than perceived value, motivation becomes fragile, reinforcing Deci and Ryan’s (2000) argument that classrooms should cultivate both practical connections and intrinsic interest for sustainable motivation.

Support in Learning English and Discouragement

Students explained support systems beyond the classroom: “The majority of students get support from parents and peers.” This aligns with Self-Determination Theory’s relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 2000) and Vygotsky’s (1978) socially mediated learning. However, significant resource limitations emerged: [Hamro sir le kahile ni picture ra resource prayog garnu hudaina, jasle garda class ektarfi ra (wakka lagdo hunchha)] (Our teacher never uses pictures or resources, making class one-sided and boring). This extends Kafle’s (2023) identification of limited teaching materials by providing student voice on precisely how resource poverty creates pedagogical monotony. Discouragement arose from cognitive barriers (“Poor background in English language; didn’t understand the lesson”), emotional harm (“Teacher makes jokes about my study”), and monotonous instruction (“(I want to sleep in English class) due to laziness and no entertaining

class”). These factors interact and compound, creating motivational spirals where initial difficulty provokes negative teacher response, emotional withdrawal, and further learning failure.

Uneven and Predominantly Low Student Motivation

Most teachers agreed that student motivation is generally low to moderate, driven primarily by examinations. One teacher stated: “Most students are not highly motivated to learn English. Only a few students actively participate, while the majority remain silent and hesitant.” Another observed: [Bujadainan English bore lagchha], k garne bore lagx] (Students feel bored both when they understand and when they don’t). This striking observation indicates English has become associated with boredom regardless of comprehension level, suggesting instruction focuses on formal correctness and examination preparation rather than meaningful communication extending Kafle’s (2023) findings beyond exam pressure to reveal that exam orientation produces boredom even when content is understood.

Motivational Strategies: Theory vs. Practice

The central theme emerging from teacher data is the gap between stated commitment to motivational strategies and actual classroom implementation. Many teachers reported using warm-up activities, praise, role-play, dialogue practice, games, and group discussions: “We usually begin with a warm-up activity and then move to group discussion. Students feel more active when they speak.” However, contrasting voices revealed different realities: “We cannot always use group work because the class is too large and students misunderstand the task” and “Motivation is not as important as completing the course. Students need to pass the exam. Grades matter more than psychological aspects.” These findings strongly align with Poudel (2019) and Kafle (2023), where exam pressure and institutional expectations reinforce conventional teaching. From a sociocultural perspective (Vygotsky, 1978),

limited application of interactive methods reduces scaffolding and collaborative learning opportunities essential for cognitive growth. The issue appears systemic rather than individual.

Constraints on the Teacher’s Motivational Role

Teachers acknowledged their expected motivational role but felt severely constrained. One explained: “Although teachers are expected to motivate students, large class sizes, heavy workload, and lack of institutional support make it difficult.” Another articulated the contradictory pressures: “If the class runs, parents are happy; if I am satisfied, everyone becomes unhappy. If the students are not promoted, parents become unhappy; if I punish or beat them, the class goes out of control.” This statement encapsulates the deeply conflicted position of teachers within Nepal’s school system, where authority is weakened and expectations are contradictory limiting teachers’ capacity to motivate students meaningfully. Another teacher added: [Khasai gardana, time waste hunchha] (Motivational activities feel like time waste due to syllabus pressure). What research identifies as essential motivational practice, teachers experience as a luxury they cannot afford a finding that contrasts sharply with the more ideal conditions reported in Rahman et al.’s (2022) urban, well-resourced context.

Interactive Activities: Temporary Engagement, Not Sustained Integration

Teachers reported that interactive activities temporarily increased engagement but remained sporadic. One noted: [Khelna diyasi khushi hunchhan, padhai ma khassai dhyān hudain] (Students are happy when allowed to play, but don’t focus much on studies). This reveals a conceptual separation between “play” and “learning” contrary to Vygotsky’s (1978) Sociocultural Theory and communicative approaches, which treat meaningful interaction as constitutive of language acquisition, not peripheral to it. Another noted: “Occasionally, showing short videos increases attention, but

such activities are rare.” The word “occasional” captures the implementation challenge: even when teachers know strategies work, sustaining them consistently proves difficult, extending Poudel’s (2022) findings. The responses suggest a shift from teacher-mediated language learning to technology-mediated interaction, raising questions about the changing nature of language learning practices.

Poor Connection Between English and Real-Life Needs

Teachers acknowledged limited success in connecting English to students’ current lives: “[Bidesh jindabad vanchhan student haru aajvoli]” (English is seen only as useful for going abroad). This foreign employment framing is temporally distant, may not resonate universally, and positions English as purely instrumental rather than communicatively relevant to current academic, social, and digital life. One teacher noted: “[Literature bahek aru interest dekhaudainan]” (Students show interest only in literature) paradoxically confirming students’ reported enjoyment of literary activities while framing it as exceptional rather than generalisable. This represents a missed pedagogical opportunity: if literature generates authentic intrinsic interest, increased emphasis on literature-based teaching could enhance overall motivation, as Poudel (2022) demonstrated. Dörnyei’s (2005) L2 Motivational Self System suggests the Ideal L2 Self must become concrete and locally anchored, not confined to distant migration aspirations.

Insufficient Individualised Feedback

Teachers acknowledged providing encouragement but admitted it is often general rather than individualised: [Aafu padhdainan, hamile sabai lai time dina sakinna] (Individual attention is not possible). Large class sizes prevent personalised feedback which research indicates is crucial for developing self-efficacy and motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Without specific, actionable feedback, encouraging words feel hollow, and struggling students, who most need support receive least attention in an unconscious concentration on

more responsive learners. International research suggests optimal language class sizes of fifteen to twenty students, contrasting sharply with Nepali realities of forty to sixty students a structural barrier that pedagogical technique alone cannot overcome.

Conclusion and Implications

The results of the study explicitly indicate that motivation in learning languages is not a fixed learner trait but a constant outcome guided by classroom practices and teacher behaviour. Students are most motivated when English learning is interactive, meaningful, and connected to real-life purposes. Strategies such as group and pair work, storytelling, discussion-based activities, and use of practical examples encourage active participation and sustained interest. Positive reinforcement, constructive feedback, and opportunities to use English without fear of error help students develop confidence and reduce anxiety. Lecture-dominated instruction, excessive exam orientation, and punitive responses to errors, conversely, weaken motivation and discourage learner engagement.

Examining student and teacher data together reveals important convergences and divergences. Both groups recognize that motivation is generally low and that effective teaching requires more than lecture and textbook transmission; both identify resource limitations, large classes, and examination pressure as significant constraints. However, students attribute motivational problems primarily to teacher behaviour, while teachers attribute them to structural constraints beyond individual control. So, it is asserted that student motivation in English language learning emerges from the interaction between appropriate motivational strategies and an active, supportive teacher role. Strengthening teachers’ capacity to apply motivational practices, alongside institutional reforms addressing class size, curriculum flexibility, and assessment systems is essential. Both teachers and the students argued that motivation enhances active engagement with language as it enables meaningful participation in communicative practices and development of linguistic competence. Along with our experiences

of working with the students of different levels, we also have realized that motivation directly influences learners' willingness to communicate.

Based on the findings, several practical implications have been inferred. First, teachers need to adopt supportive, student-friendly practices that create safe, encouraging classroom environments where learners feel respected and emotionally supported. Second, interactive and engaging activities group discussions, role-plays, language games, pair work, and project-based tasks should be systematically integrated rather than treated as occasional extras, as they make learning meaningful and reduce hesitation. Third, content should be scaffolded and differentiated to build comprehension progressively, ensuring challenge remains within the Zone of Proximal Development. Fourth, equal attention must be given to all learners, including quiet, shy, and struggling students who require encouragement and equitable participation opportunities. Fifth, schools and institutions must provide structural support through manageable class sizes, adequate teaching materials, and professional development programmes focused on motivational strategies and learner-centred approaches. Finally, the connection between English and students' current academic, social, and digital lives should be actively strengthened to anchor the Ideal L2 Self. Improving motivation at the secondary level ultimately requires collective effort from teachers, institutions, and the policymakers.

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