

Factors Affecting EFL Students' Performance in Linguistics and Students Self-Reported Motivational Strategies

العوامل المؤثرة على أداء طلبة اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية في اللسانيات واستراتيجيات التحفيز حسب منظور الطلبة

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Received: 14/10/2024

Accepted: 13/07/2025

Published: 31/07/2025

Abstract:

The aim of the current study is to investigate the factors standing behind English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students' performance in Linguistics and the motivational strategies that could make them more engaged, from EFL student's perspectives. First year students' grades in Linguistics' exam have been used as a parameter of achievement. A questionnaire was distributed to 95 first year EFL students from the Department of English at the University of Souk-Ahras, Algeria. Results revealed that the main factors affecting students' performance in linguistics could be attributed to: motivational issues, memorization issues or proficiency issues. Regarding the motivational strategies, cognitively engaging activities and the techniques that could make the content clearer are highly endorsed by students, besides their need for creating a pleasant and supportive atmosphere.

Keywords: EFL learners, motivation, motivational strategies, linguistics, EFL learners' performance

ملخص البحث:

تهدف هذه الدراسة الى استكشاف العوامل المؤثرة على أداء طلبة اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية في مقياس اللسانيات والاستراتيجيات التحفيزية التي يمكن أن تجعلهم أكثر انغماسا، وذلك من وجهة نظر طلبة اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية. تم استخدام العلامات المتحصل عليها في امتحان اللسانيات من طرف طلبة السنة الأولى كمعيار للإنجاز. اما البيانات فقد تم جمعها عن طريق توزيع استبيان على 95 طالبًا من طلبة السنة الأولى في قسم اللغة الإنجليزية بجامعة سوق أهراس بالجزائر. كشفت النتائج أن العوامل الرئيسية التي تؤثر على أداء الطلبة في مادة اللسانيات يمكن أن تعزى إلى: مسائل متعلقة بالجانب التحفيزي، مسائل متعلقة بالحفظ، وأخرى متعلقة بكفاءة الطلبة. فيما يتعلق بالاستراتيجيات التحفيزية، فإن الأنشطة المحفزة على التركيز، والتقنيات التي تساهم في جعل المحتوى أكثر وضوحا تحظى بتأييد كبير من قبل الطلبة، إلى جانب حاجتهم إلى خلق جو لطيف وداعم.

الكلمات المفتاحية: طلبة اللغة الإنجليزية، التحفيز، استراتيجيات التحفيز، اللسانيات، انجاز طلبة اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية

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1. INTRODUCTION

Learning English as a foreign language (EFL) has become an indisputable need for many people nowadays. It has the potential to enrich one's personal and professional life. However, this process is influenced by plenteous factors that could be internal or external. Motivation has been claimed to be a major operator that determines L2 learners' outcomes. Dörnyei (2001), stated that motivation "has a very important role in determining success or failure in any learning situation" (p.2). Moreover, Yashima (2002) acknowledged that "The level of motivation, in turn, influences the linguistic outcome (e.g., achievement or proficiency)" (p.56).

In Algerian universities, English has been taught as a foreign language for decades ago. linguistics has been considered as a fundamental compulsory subject in all English departments during the whole degree course. However, results do not come up with teachers over all expectations. In a statistical procedure made from the part of the researcher, based on data brought from the English department administration at The University of Souk-Ahras (PV de délibération par matière -Session normale-, Matière: Linguistique et phonétique), results showed that students who had *less than 10 out of 20* as the whole score in Linguistics first semester exam (it was the only exam since the subject was taught throughout one semester) represents **52,77%** of the whole population (N=180), and **29,44%** had *from 10 to 13.75*. These results surely do not correspond with teachers' desires concerning their students' achievement.

The present paper aims, first, to shed light on factors affecting first year EFL students' achievement in Linguistics, as a sample of Algerian EFL students, and second, to explore the motivational strategies that students wish to see implemented in the classroom.

Accordingly, this study seeks to answer the following questions:

1. What are the main factors affecting first-year EFL students' achievement in Linguistics?
2. What motivational strategies do students hope to be implemented in the classroom?

2. Literature Review

It has been widely argued from the part of researchers that learners' cognition and affect are two sides of the same coin that contribute in their performance and achievement. These two aspects are in direct influence of teachers; which makes teaching an exhaustive and multi-skill demanding activity. Teachers need to pay much attention to learners' engagement and interest in the subject being taught. This implies implementing the appropriate techniques and strategies to overcome their fear, anxiety and distraction, and empower their positive attitudes and emotional aspects such as self-esteem and motivation.

Motivation has gained the attention of numerous scholars in psychology and language education, as being one of the essential forces that extremely impacts L2 learners' achievement. Many definitions have been constructed to motivation. The reason may be that the concept is abstract in one hand, and very broad that it covers many incentives which can justify or explain people's way of thinking and the resulting behaviors on the other hand. Covington (1998) put it: "Motivation, like the concept of gravity, is easier to describe (in terms of its outward, observable effects) than it is to define" (p.1).

Motivation in academic setting can be defined as student's tendency "to find academic activities meaningful and worthwhile and to try to derive the intended academic benefits from them" (Brophy, 1998, as cited in Zeynali et al, 2019). Brophy (1983), reported that "student motivation to learn" can be recognized in two aspects: as 'a general trait' and 'a situation-specific state'. By 'general trait', he referred it back to students' constant behavior to appreciate learning as an end in itself, while 'Specific-situations state' of motivation, according to Brophy, is concerned with students' intentional engagement to accomplish the concepts or skills targeted in classroom tasks.

In relation to language learning, Gardner (1985) defines motivation as 'the extent to which the individual works or strives to learn the language because of a desire to do so and the satisfaction experienced in this activity' (p.10). According to him, motivation involves four components: the goal, the effort, the desire to attain the goal, and the positive attitude toward the activity. Several empirical studies suggest the important connection between students' motivation and their academic performance such as: Busato, Prins, Elshout, & Hamaker (2000); Pintrich (2003); Rotgans & Schmidt (2012) and Sogunro (2015).

The context of learning has the potential to erode or reduce learners' motivation or even get it lost and create a demotivated learner (Keblawi, 2008). *Demotivation* is another concept that has attracted the attention of psychologists and researchers in the field of L2 learning (Falout & Maruyama, 2004; Dörnyei, 2005; Aladdin, 2013). Demotivation in language learning refers to the reduction or loss of motivation to study or continue learning a language. It manifests as a decrease in enthusiasm, interest, or effort that a learner initially had towards language learning. Broadly speaking, *demotivation* could be the result of different external contextual factors (such as negatively perceived teacher, materials, and methods) and internal factors such as learners' beliefs and perception of the language. The context of language learning has a crucial role in shaping learners' motivation. In Dörnyei's (2005) L2 Motivational Self System, which has been recognized as a significant framework within second language acquisition research as providing insights into the complex motivational dynamics that influence learners' engagement, persistence, and success in learning a second language,

the context of learning is recognized within the L2 learning experience, the third component of the system. According to Dörnyei (2014), as referred to by Bouras (2023), this third component encompasses a variety of teaching and learning elements, including the language course, the experience of success as context-specific incentives linked to the learning context and experience, and the teacher's influence. The interaction between these three components (the ideal self, the ought to self and the L2 learning experience) as proclaimed by Dörnyei, influences the motivation of language learners. In the same vein, Kablawi (2006), as referred to by Keblawi (2008), talked about two types of contexts that could impact learners' motivation: the *general learning context* and the *immediate learning context*. The *general learning context* is shaped by the sociolinguistic, socio-cultural and socio-political status of the language and its speakers; while the *immediate learning context* refers to the school climate, the learning materials, learners' relationship with each other, and notably teachers' role.

Talking about teachers' role, a plethora of publications has pointed to the great and effective job assigned to teachers. Being a motivator is highly recommended for effective teachers. They are supposed to implement a variety of motivational strategies that strongly align with learners' traits. Results revealed from a study conducted by Guilloteaux and Dörnyei (2008) in English to Speakers of Other Languages classrooms (ESOL) in South Korea, including 27 teachers and more than 1300 learners, show that there is a positive relationship between teachers' motivational practice and learners' language learning motivation.

In the field of EFL instruction, linguistics constitutes an indispensable component of the curriculum rather than a peripheral element. Substantial scholarly evidence (Postman & Weingartner, 1966; Correa, 2014) underscores its critical role in enhancing learners' linguistic proficiency through rigorous analysis of language subsystems—notably discourse analysis—and by enhancing learners' metacognitive awareness, which is essential for effective and independent language learning. Additionally, employing contrastive analysis between the first language (L1) and the second language (L2) aids in smoothing the transition and improving learners' overall performance in the target language.

Error analysis, as a key area within applied linguistics, contributes meaningfully to language development by systematically identifying and addressing patterns of error in learner production. Moreover, engaging in linguistic analysis enhances learners' metalinguistic awareness, allowing them to critically assess features of the target language without reliance on their first language (L1). This analytical capability facilitates the acquisition of advanced vocabulary through the breakdown of morphological components, enhances pronunciation through increased phonetic sensitivity, and strengthens pragmatic skills by fostering understanding of sociolinguistic conventions. Consequently, linguistics can play a pivotal role in fostering autonomous

learning, enabling learners to grasp linguistic patterns deductively and applying them effectively across diverse interactional settings.

Concurrently, in the context of L2 learning, linguistics equips language educators with theoretically grounded pedagogical methodologies, enhances language acquisition strategies, and encourages critical thinking and problem-solving skills. Overall, studying linguistics enhances communication, cultural competence, and problem-solving abilities.

In this paper, we will focus on first year EFL learners' perceptions towards the factors influencing their performance in linguistics' tests and exam, aiming to gain more information on teachers' possible practices that could elevate learners' level of motivation from EFL learners' perspectives.

3. Research Methodology

In this section we will deal, in details, with the overall research design, participants, the instrument used as a data collection tool, and the techniques adopted in the analysis of data.

3.1. Research Design

An exploratory research design was applied to investigate the factors affecting EFL learners' performance in linguistics, as well as the strategies that could make the subject more interesting from learners' perspectives. A survey was designed and distributed to students from five groups of first year EFL learners, after conducting a pilot study with the sixth group during the second semester of the academic year 2023-2024.

3.2. Participants

We investigated ninety-five (n95) first year EFL students (81females; 13 males; 1with missing gender data) which represents 52,77% of the total population (N180). They were ages between 18 and 23 (with the exception of: one student was 17, one was 26, another was 27, and one student with missing age data). All enrolled in the same university, the University of Souk-Ahras, Algeria. The study targeted first-year students because they aligned well with the research goals. Participants were randomly selected to answer the questionnaire. Random sampling is a sampling technique in which individuals in the population have an equal probability of being chosen.

3.3. Instrument

A questionnaire was designed and distributed to participants after they had finished their first semester exams. As a first step, a pilot survey took place on March, 2023, with one group (20 students) among six groups of first year EFL learners, during regular class time, where they had a class with the teacher/researcher, who tried repeatedly to understand whether students have any sort of ambiguity, and confirmed that their

responses would remain confidential. After slight modifications, the final version of the survey was administered to students from the remaining five groups during their scheduled class sessions, with the assistance of colleagues who kindly volunteered to help. While the questionnaire includes fourteen questions addressing various aspects related to learning English as a foreign language and linguistics in the EFL context, only those relevant to the present study's objectives are analyzed in this paper.

3.4. Data Analysis Techniques

Statistical and thematic analysis procedures were adopted by the researcher. The obtained answers from the open-ended questions were organized in themes and kept confidential, since the responses were anonymous.

4. Findings and Discussion

In the subsequent section, we will provide the description and analysis of the results obtained from participants' answers.

4.1. Factors Affecting Learners' Performance in Linguistics

Students were asked the following question: *If you feel not satisfied or shy about the marks you got in either the linguistics' tests or exam, what were the factors (causes) you feel they affected your performance the most?*

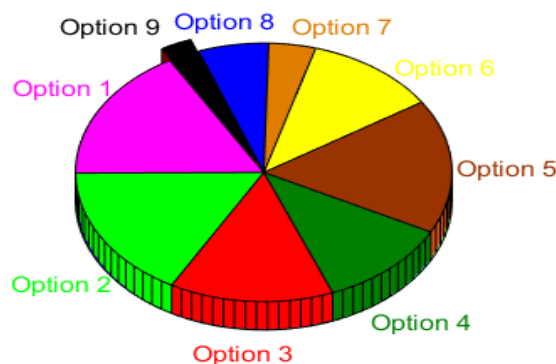
We suggested a number of options thought to be the reasons stand behind students' unsatisfied performance. Most of the options were taken from the answers students of two groups had provided after having taken their first test in linguistics (with the teacher researcher) during the first semester (they responded to a question about the reasons stand behind their poor performance). Results are exhibited below:

Table 1

Factors Affecting Learners' Performance in Linguistics

		Percentage
Option 1	<i>You couldn't memorize most of the lessons</i>	16.77 %
Option 2	<i>You could memorize but you didn't do your best</i>	16.77 %
Option 3	<i>You didn't know the way you should revise your lessons</i>	14.09 %
Option 4	<i>Most lessons were complicated</i>	11.40 %
Option 5	<i>Lessons were easy but long</i>	16.77 %
Option 6	<i>Vocabulary was challenging</i>	11.40 %
Option 7	<i>You could not concentrate with the teacher while they were explaining the lesson</i>	04.02 %
Option 8	<i>You could not ask questions while the teacher had been presenting the lesson</i>	06.04 %

Fig 1
Factors Affecting Learners' Performance in Linguistics



Option 9	You did not know about the causes that lead to such performance	02.68 %
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Results show that students' poor performance in linguistics refers primary to two reasons: either to students' disability to memorize, as it is shown in the pie chart (option one and five), or students' unwillingness to memorize (option 2 with the same percentage). This indicates that either students have problems related to memory and memorization and they thought that successful performance in linguistics depends only on memorization, or they lack motivation to expend their effort in memorization. Effort, as mentioned above, is regarded as one amongst four components of motivation according to Gardner (1985). Dörnyei (2001) claimed that within the cognitive approach, the current trend to motivation, the individual motivation to take action in order to achieve their goals is determined by their belief towards the action, their evaluation to their possibilities and the sufficient support got from the environment. So, being demotivated could be attributed to various factors: students' beliefs towards the value of linguistics, students' evaluation to their self-efficacy and self-perceptions of competence, the lack of support inside or outside the classroom. This latter can refer to the negative atmosphere in the classroom, including peer and teacher interaction, as well as teachers' characteristics such as enthusiasm, empathy, and effective teaching methods.

The second place goes to students' ignorance of the way this subject can be dealt with in order to be assimilated, as option three shows in figure 1 above. This may refer to

students' unfamiliarity with linguistics since it is totally a new field that has never been dealt with during their high school program. Or, the lack of teachers' guidance and support; this latter lies within teacher's responsibility as a mentor or a facilitator (Jagtap, 2016). Dörnyei (2001), mentioned it as a strategy that can maintain and protect learners' motivation.

'Challenging vocabulary 'and 'lessons being complicated' occupy the third place in terms of the factors affecting students' performance in linguistic. Students' proficiency and aptitude may explain this result.

The lowest percentage goes to students' ignorance about the reasons that had led to such unsatisfied performance (2.68%). This indicates that the majority of students are conscious about the factors affecting their achievement in linguistics; the **fact** that may open the door to teachers' intervention.

4.2. Motivational Strategies Suggested by Students

Students were asked to suggest some techniques that can make the course more interesting for them (*Please, write some suggestions that can make the course more interesting for you*). Data was gathered, coded and organized in themes. Before presenting the main results, it is worth mentioning that: a considerable number of participants didn't answer this question, 32 students out of 95 (34%), 15 (16%) students provide meaningless answers, so we didn't consider them. *One* student suggested to use MOODLE. Only 3 students (3%) reported their satisfaction of what had been done in class.

The section below presents the major themes extracted from the answers provided by the remaining participants (44 students). The themes and their percentages are displayed in table 2 and figure 2 below:

1.Need for practice and active participation: this category is ranked the first (32%), it includes students who expressed their need either for practicing what had been learnt in class in a form of in-class exercises and homework, or having activities that allow them to be active participants in the process of teaching/learning, such as: research and presentations, preparation at home, asking questions about the content and discuss that in class. One student suggested working in groups, using books, writing essays ...etc. This percentage is the highest among the four categories constructed from the obtained data.

It can be understood that a large number of students found it difficult to assimilate what had been lectured in class without much practice. The findings may reflect their tedium from having much theoretical content; so, they require activities that make them cognitively more engaged. A great deal of research confirms the positive correlation between students' level of engagement and their learning. Englert (1984), referring to Rosenshine, 1977, put it: "Research supports the notion that when teachers allocate a

great deal of time for instruction while maintaining a high level of task engagement, student learning increases” (p.4).

On the other hand, practice is advantageous for students to get corrective and constructive feedback. This result aligns with what Brophy & Evertson (1981) reached. Pratton et al (1986), referring to Brophy & Evertson (1981), recognized that “successful teachers presented demonstrations, followed immediately by student practice and corrective feedback.” (p.210,). On their own contribution, Pratton and Hales, after conducting an experimental study to test the impact of active participation as one single teaching strategy on student achievement, concluded that “active student participation exerts a positive influence on fifth-grade student achievement of relatively unique instructional material (ibid, p.210).

2. *Careful explanation, repetition, summary, and examples*: this category occupies the second place, representing **29%**. It involves the students who expressed their need to careful explanation, repetition and unchallenged vocabulary; and those who required the teacher to summarize the lessons and avoid too much details. In this regard, one participant wrote “*Do not explain too much information in one session*”. Besides that, other students pointed out their need for examples.

It seems that a large proportion of learners were struggling to grasp the content teachers were delivering. This may refer to the lack of clarity which is one of the fundamental components of effective teaching. Wlodkowski (1986), in his inventory of an instructional clarity checklist comprising 24 elements, as **cited in** Dörnyei (2001), stressed the importance of providing simple explanation that learners understand, repeating things they do not understand, using examples to illustrate with, devoting enough time for practice, and asking and answering questions. Dörnyei acknowledged the significance of the techniques mentioned in this list in motivating learners, stating that “The techniques listed there [referring to Wlodkowski’s checklist] are to illustrate the kind of teaching methodological issues which are really important with regard to motivating teaching...” (p.26). Moreover, providing numerous examples and nonexamples lies within the second phase, *active demonstration and practice* of new concepts, of lesson presentation proposed by Englert (1984) for an effective teacher.

3. *Creating a pleasant and supportive atmosphere in the classroom*: the current category represents **20%**. It encompasses students who indicated their need for *enjoyable activities* in class, such as games and competitions; and those who expressed their need for some teacher’s characteristics, such as smiling, being sympathetic with students, and allowing them to have a rest for few minutes. Below are students’ suggestions -literally reported:

-Student 54: *“For me the most thing that can make study interesting is that the teacher knows how to be friend with their students”*.

-Student 67: *“teacher respect their students”*

-Student 70: *“teacher must smile more and draw happiness in students’ faces.”*

-Student 71: *“teachers can be more interactive with students...”*

-Student 85 wrote in Arabic “ان يكون الأستاذ ودود مع الطلبة و السماح لهم بأخذ راحة 5 دقائق” (*The teacher should be genial with the students and allow them to take a break for five minutes*)

From the reported answers, it seems that students are calling for teachers’ *empathy*. Empathy has gained a number of scholars’ attention so far. Having proclaimed that learning takes place in adults as a reaction to their goals and perspectives, Wlodkowski (2008), acknowledged the significance of empathy for motivating instruction in teaching adults. Moreover, he considered it a pillar in adult instruction that consists of three components which will aid teachers to decide whether they have gauged the level of empathy needed for the instruction to be motivating. (For more details see Carl Rogers, 1969; Daniel Goleman 1995; Wlodkowski, 2008)

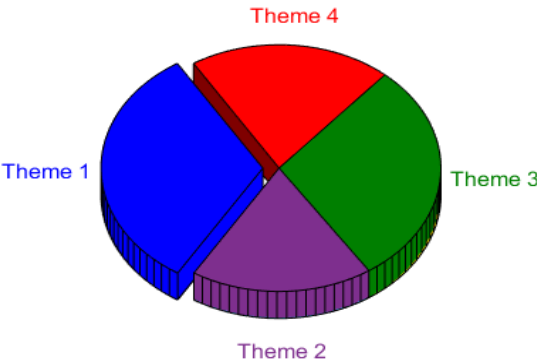
4. *Using audiovisuals*: **18%** proposed the use of visuals and audiovisuals including: videos, diagrams, photos, data show, writing on the board and providing handouts. Mariotti (2015) conducted a study involving 45 language teachers across Europe, who responded to a survey comprising both Likert-scale and open-ended questions. The aim was to gain insight into teachers’ implementation of three types of video materials in language instruction. One notable finding was that teachers reported using audiovisual materials primarily for motivational purposes. Furthermore, the choice of audiovisual content varied depending on learners’ proficiency level—whether beginner or advanced (Sydorenko et al., 2024). Our results, on the other hand, align with the positive attitude that teachers reported in a research study conducted in Turkey by Kaderoğlu and Esquerre (2021), inspecting 63 EFL teachers’ use of captioned videos in class. Teachers reported that they integrate captions in their classes as a tool to facilitate comprehension and aid in language development, which covers also vocabulary expansion; this latter is the area which a number of our students struggle with, as the data revealed in section 4.1.

On the other hand, visual aids are reported to play a significant role in second language (L2) learning; they can enhance comprehension, retention, and engagement. Furthermore, learners may become more motivated when content is visually stimulating and diverse. Mashhadia and Jamalifarb (2014) stated that “In the ESL/EFL classroom, using visual aids can help students to strengthen and reinforce what they have learned. The reason may be that they allow students to absorb the information through an additional sensory perception” (p.299). On their part, they confirmed the positive influence of visual cues on Iranian intermediate EFL learners’ vocabulary acquisition in a study conducted with 90 EFL learners.

Table 2
Themes Representing the Suggested Motivational Strategies

Frequency		Percentage
Theme 1	Practice and active participation 21	32.30%
Theme 2	Self-learning 18	18.46%
Theme 3	Group work 27	29.23%
Theme 4	Self-reflection 16	20%

Fig. 2
Motivational Strategies Suggested by First Year EFL Students



5. CONCLUSION

The aim of this research paper was getting insights about students' poor performance in linguistics, as well as gaining information about the strategies that could be motivating, from students' perspectives.

The findings of this study show that: firstly, the primary reasons standing behind students' performance in linguistics are either memory-related problems or motivation-related problems. In this regard, Astuti (2016), acknowledged that while multiple factors

affect students' motivation in learning, the influence of teachers is substantial (Raharja et al, 2019). This disclosed teachers' valuable mediation in raising students' motivation and opportunity of success. Additionally, proficiency-related problems, also played an important role in students' achievement.

Secondly, concerning the motivational strategies proposed by first year EFL students, 'cognitively engaging-activities' occupies the first place. This runs in the same vein as many previous studies that confirm the link between learners' engagement and their outcomes. Careful explanation, repetition, summary, and examples are highly recommended. In close proximity of this, is students' need for a pleasant and supportive atmosphere which Dörnyei (2001), on his turn, stressed its importance in classroom motivational practice.

This study undergoes some limitations; the first one is the small number of students who hinted to the incentives that may elevate their motivation level, which in turn impacts their achievement in the subject under investigation. The second limitation lies in the fact that this study was conducted in one university in Algeria. Thus, generalization should be considered cautiously. However, the current paper provides valuable insights vis-à-vis the factors affecting students' performance in linguistics, and how can teachers intervene effectively to minimize the stumbling blocks and create, maintain, and boost students' motivation in studying linguistics.

Further studies are encouraged to include a larger size of participants in order to gain more insights about EFL students' possible motives in studying linguistics, as well as to measure their motivation level during linguistics' class. Equally important is conducting experimental studies for the sake of testing the proposed strategies' effectiveness.

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