



# Motivation in Learning English: A Case Study of Second-Year Students at Saigon University

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## Abstract

This study investigated motivation in language learning through a questionnaire distributed to 108 second-year students at the Faculty of Foreign Languages, Saigon University. The findings reveal that the students demonstrate a relatively positive attitude toward learning English. In the relationship between academic performance and learning motivation, the motivation to learn English for better job opportunities ranks highest (accounting for 73.1%), as students believe it is essential for achieving material success after graduation. The motivation to gain promotion opportunities in the future also holds a relatively high percentage (67.6%), followed by the motivation to learn English for entertainment purposes (66.7%), the belief that English is a global language (64.8%), and the desire to communicate with foreigners (61.1%). In addition, the motivation to learn English for travel purposes also shows a fairly high proportion (58.3%). These factors all have an impact on students' academic performance. The findings of the study offer useful suggestions for both students and lecturers in overcoming challenges in teaching and learning, helping students develop a more active and positive learning motivation.

**Keywords:** Motivation, English learning, intrinsic, extrinsic

## INTRODUCTION

In the era of globalization, English has become more than a means of communication; it is a critical gateway to academic knowledge, professional development, and global participation. The vast majority of scientific publications, academic databases, and professional resources are produced in English, making proficiency in the language indispensable for university students, particularly those enrolled in Faculties of Foreign Languages. Beyond general communication, mastery of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) is increasingly required to support students' discipline-based competencies in fields such as

education, economics, technology, and medicine. Consequently, the ability to learn English effectively is no longer optional but essential for students' academic success and future employability.

Despite this urgency, a burning issue persists in higher education contexts: many students demonstrate weak motivation and declining attitudes toward learning English. Based on classroom observations and instructional experience, a considerable number of students engage in English learning merely as a compulsory requirement rather than as a meaningful academic or professional investment. Empirical evidence supports this concern. Hoang (2024a), in a study conducted at Saigon University, reported a noticeable decline in students' attitudes toward ESP courses, influenced by curriculum relevance, course content, and instructional practices. Similarly, Hoang (2024b) found that while some students are externally driven by employment pressure, others experience demotivation due to misaligned curricula that fail to address learners' needs and expectations. These findings indicate that motivational problems are not incidental but systemic.

Previous research has consistently emphasized the central role of motivation in language learning success. Klimova (2011) demonstrated that both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation significantly influence second-language acquisition at the university level, particularly when English is required for academic and professional purposes. However, although existing studies confirm the importance of motivation, most research remains descriptive and general, focusing on broad student populations or ESP contexts without examining which motivational factors are most influential at specific stages of study. In particular, there is a lack of empirical research that isolates dominant motivational drivers among second-year students in Faculties of Foreign Languages, a critical phase in which initial enthusiasm often declines and academic demands intensify.

This gap highlights the novelty and significance of the present study. Unlike previous studies that examine motivation in general terms, this research seeks to identify and prioritize the most influential motivational factors shaping English learning among second-year students of the Faculty of Foreign Languages. By focusing on this specific cohort, the study offers a more nuanced understanding of how motivational dynamics evolve within a structured academic program.

Furthermore, this study is solution-oriented. Beyond identifying motivational factors, it aims to generate pedagogical insights and practical recommendations for curriculum design, teaching strategies, and learning support systems that can foster sustained motivation. By aligning instructional practices with students' dominant motivational needs, the study aspires to contribute to more effective English learning environments and improved language outcomes in university contexts.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

Motivation in learning English is one of the important factors related to the influence of learners' attitudes on the process of acquiring and applying a foreign language. Up to now, researchers have proposed various classifications of learning motivation. According to Ryan and Deci (1985), human motivation is formed and maintained through the satisfaction of three innate psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and social connection. Thereby, research shows that learners' purposes for language learning are not only based on themselves, but are also influenced by surrounding factors. In addition, Gardner (2005) classified motivation into three main categories: instrumental motivation, integrative

motivation, and motivation derived from attitudes toward the learning environment. In Gardner's model (2005), the first two types of motivation are closely related and play a foundational role in shaping learners' attitudes before they participate in language classes. Additionally, research has added that external factors such as facilities, teachers, and peers have a certain influence on learning quality. According to the study by Hoang (2024b), which surveyed 138 students learning Chinese, showed that the role of the instructor is also a strongly influential factor, especially in foreign language learning environments where teacher guidance is essential. Therefore, learners' attitudes not only reflect their level of interest but also serve as a decisive factor in the outcome of the language acquisition process. If knowledge and skills are the foundation for developing competence, then attitude is the key factor that determines the results in the learning process. However, positive improvements in the learning environment and related factors do not significantly change learners' initial motivation, but adjusting slightly on their perceptions during the course of study.

Alongside that, several studies have shown that instrumental motivation - that is, personal motivations serving the learner's own purposes (such as seeking employment or creating opportunities for promotion) - tends to be more prevalent, primarily motivated by learners' aspirations for career development and their desire to improve practical skills that can enhance their professional competence and future opportunities. In the context of current global integration, being proficient in more than two languages is gradually becoming a mandatory requirement for the workforce, especially among younger workers. A survey of 359 students from Hue University (2023) reported that 63% of the respondents agreed that their motivation for learning is influenced by societal demands regarding qualifications, competence, and skills necessary to meet job market requirements after graduation. In addition, integrative motivation, although not accounting for a large proportion, still plays an indispensable role in promoting learners' motivation to study.

In recent years, foreign language learning motivation has attracted considerable attention from researchers. As a result, earlier research in this field has tended to concentrate on investigating students' attitudes toward learning a foreign language or has remained limitations on how learners acquire a new language. While these studies have provided valuable insights, there remains a noticeable gap in the literature when it comes to an in-depth analysis of the various types of motivation and how each specifically influences students' language learning outcomes. Moreover, the ongoing process of globalization has brought about profound and far-reaching effects on learners' motivations, shaping not only their personal goals and ambitions but also redefining the practical and professional demands placed upon them in relation to foreign language proficiency.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **3.1. Research method**

To achieve the research objective, this study employed a quantitative method to investigate the motivation in learning English among second-year English-majored students at Saigon University. The quantitative approach was chosen for its ability to provide measurable and generalizable data regarding learners' attitudes and motivational orientations. Additionally, this study also conducted subjective observations during classroom sessions and self-study outside of class to assess students' autonomy through their activities during lessons.

### **3.2. Participants**

By focusing on a specific cohort—second-year university students—this study aims to uncover patterns and tendencies in motivation that are relevant to their academic stage and future professional aspirations. In particular, a total of 108 second-year English-major students at Saigon University participated in the survey. Among them, 26 were male, 80 were female, and 2 identified as belonging to other genders. This demographic distribution reflects the typical gender makeup of English language classes at the university and allows for insights into how motivational factors may vary across gender groups. The diversity within the participant pool also helps enhance the relevance and applicability of the findings to similar educational contexts.

### **3.3. Data collection instrument**

In this study, a structured questionnaire was used as the primary data collection instrument. The survey questionnaire consisted of two main parts: personal information and survey content. The questionnaire was designed primarily to explore the English learning motivation of the participants. At the same time, the Survey Content section also includes some supplementary questions intended to expand other aspects, allowing for deeper research into issues related to the influence of the surrounding environment - specifically, the teaching methods of instructors on the English learning motivation of second-year students.

The questions in Part 1 were based on criteria such as gender, ethnicity, the locality where the respondents live, the major they are studying (English Pedagogy or English Language), and the English proficiency level as self-assessed by the respondents using the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). Through this, the initial assessment of students' foreign language proficiency could be made based on their family background and the region in which they grew up and received their education.

Part 2 of the questionnaire was designed with both multiple-choice questions and open-ended questions. These questions aimed to allow students to self-assess their satisfaction with their current proficiency level, as well as to identify the difficulties they encounter during the learning process. Following this, the subsequent questions consisted of several sub-questions and are designed using the Likert scale. Thanks to this format, the survey was able to collect participants' opinions across varying levels of satisfaction, based on their self-assessment of learning attitudes and their awareness of the importance of English in the era of globalization. Next, the study presented a set of questions aimed at exploring the reasons and motivations behind students' choice to learn English instead of other languages. This was also the most important group of questions in the survey. Finally, the questionnaire included questions focusing on students' perceptions of knowledge acquisition from their instructors, their level of satisfaction, and their expectations for improving the quality of education at their university.

### **3.4. Data collection procedure**

The study was conducted in the second semester of the 2024–2025 academic year at Saigon University, with the main participants being second-year students from the Faculty of Foreign Languages. The survey was conducted primarily in the Scientific Research Methodology classes for English Language majors (838309), along with several other classes where the majority of students were in their second year. Thanks to this, the researchers were able to access the survey subjects more easily, ensuring that the accuracy of the collected data is reliable. This method was carried out by distributing online survey

questionnaires via the Google Form platform. In addition, the study also involved observing and assessing second-year students during classroom lessons as well as their self-study sessions outside class. Based on these observations, the research found that in-class learning activities play an important role in stimulating and reflecting students' motivation to learn English.

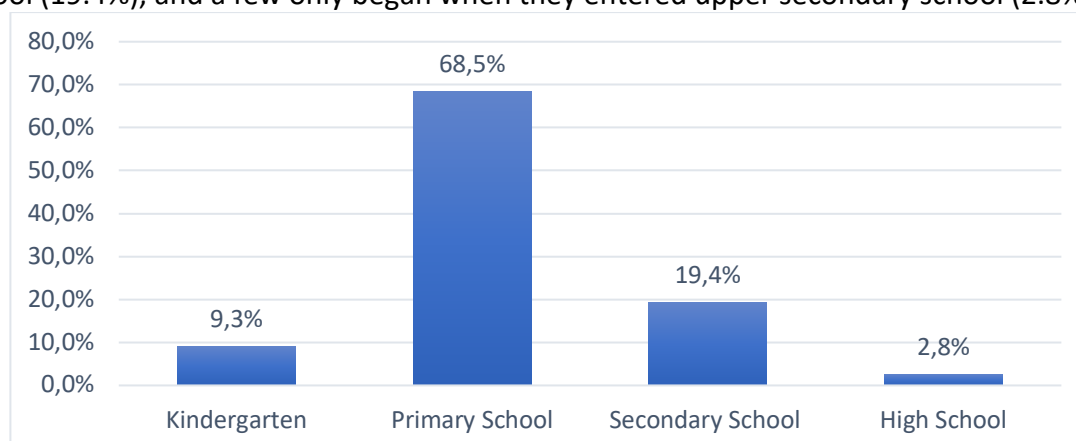
### 3.5. Data analysis

From the collected data, the research team conducted a systematic coding process before entering the responses into SPSS for analysis. Descriptive statistics, including frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations, were then computed to examine general trends and patterns in students' motivational orientations. This statistical analysis helped identify the dominant types of motivation—whether intrinsic or extrinsic—among the participants, as well as the degree to which these motivations influenced their engagement with English language learning. The use of SPSS ensured the accuracy and reliability of the data analysis, thereby supporting valid interpretations of the students' motivational profiles.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

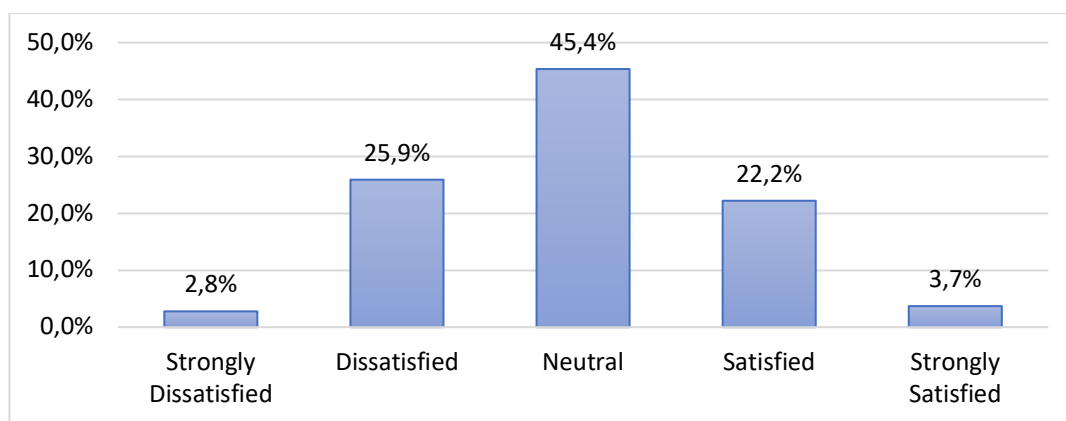
### 4.1. Students' motivation in learning English

Unlike students from other majors, those in the Faculty of Foreign Languages already had an initial motivation when choosing English as their field of study—or at least, they were aware that English is a necessary tool for communication in an international environment. As shown in Figure 1, the majority of surveyed students started learning English in primary school (68.5%), while a smaller group had the opportunity to be exposed to the language even earlier, during kindergarten (9.3%). However, there are still some students who began learning English later than their peers, starting in lower secondary school (19.4%), and a few only began when they entered upper secondary school (2.8%)



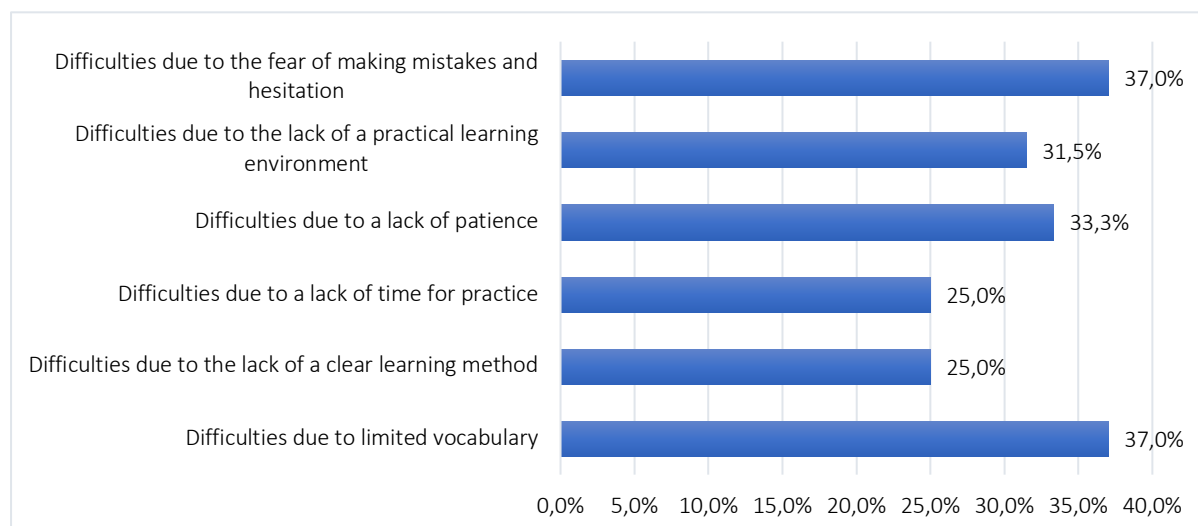
**Figure 1.** Participants' English learning background

Despite their different starting points, most students expressed satisfaction with their current English proficiency, as reflected in the survey results showing a moderate level of satisfaction (45.4%) (see Figure 2).



**Figure 2.** Participants' satisfaction with their current English proficiency

However, 37.0% of the students reported that they struggled due to a lack of essential vocabulary (see Figure 3). At the same time, many also pointed out that psychological barriers—such as shyness or a lack of communication skills—were significant concerns. Meanwhile, impatience was also considered a challenge by 33.3% of the respondents, making it the third most common difficulty mentioned in the survey (see Figure 3). Although these students belong to the Faculty of Foreign Languages and are regularly exposed to English during classroom activities, 31.5% still indicated that the lack of opportunities to practice the language in real-life situations was a major limitation (see Figure 3). This highlights a strong need for practical and applicable language use beyond the classroom. Such a gap not only poses a challenge to the language learning process but also has a considerable impact on students' motivation.

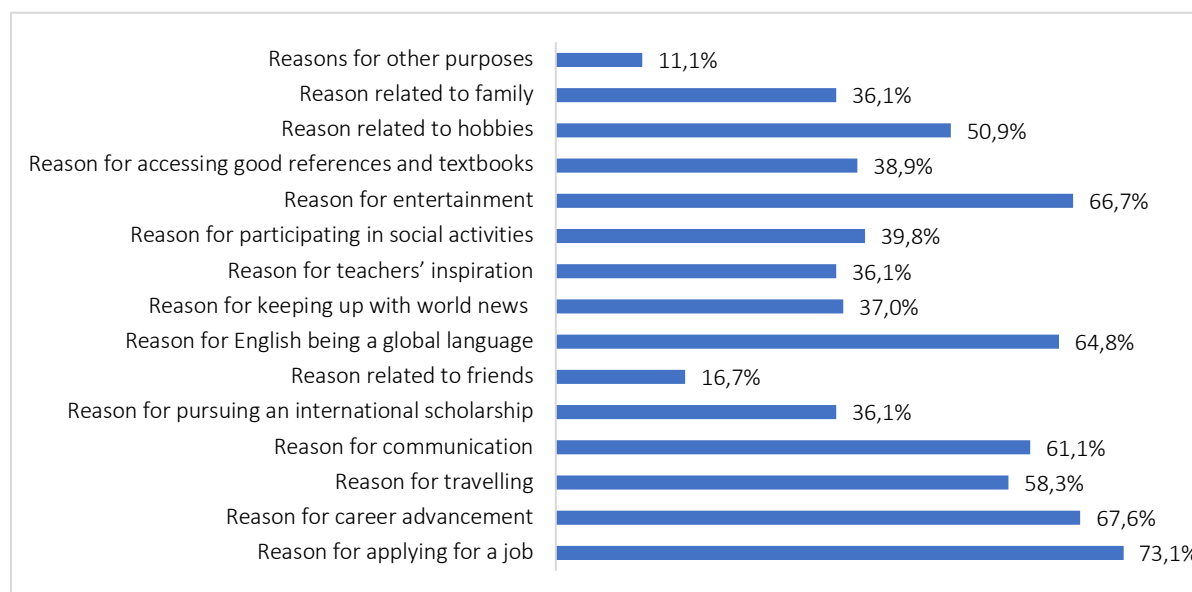


**Figure 3.** Participants' difficulties in learning English

According to Krashen's (1985) affective filter hypothesis, emotional factors such as confidence and anxiety can directly influence second language acquisition. In particular, when learners lack opportunities to practice English in real-life contexts, they are more likely to experience low self-confidence and increase anxiety, especially when required to use English in practical situations. These negative emotions raise the "affective filter," which prevent the effectiveness of language input and acquisition. Therefore, a lack of practical

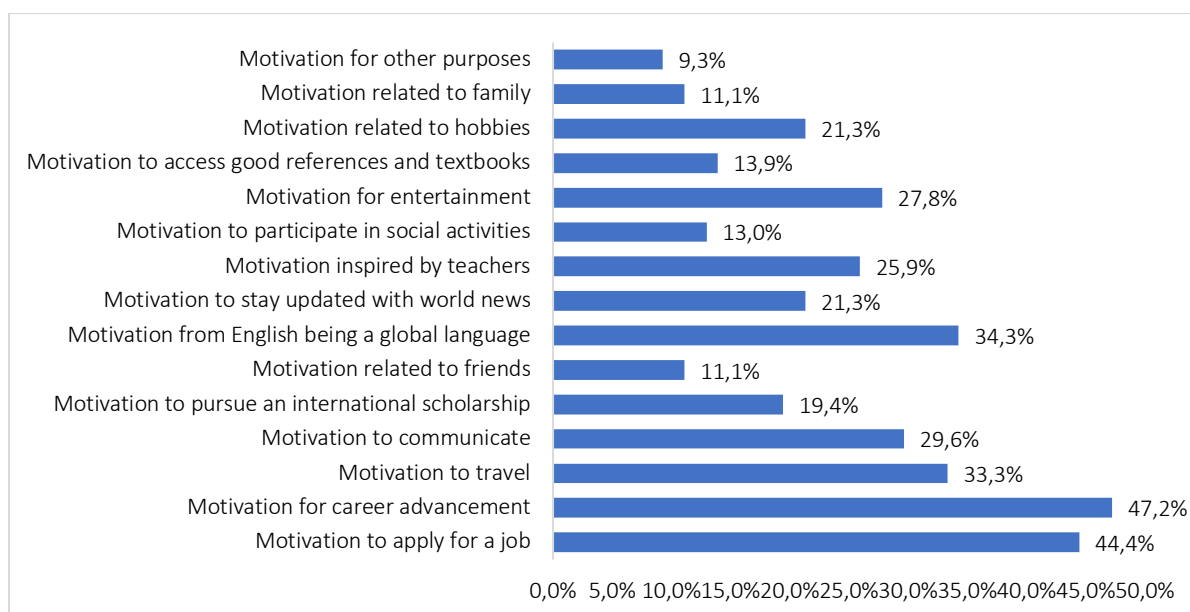
learning environments can adversely affect students' motivation, especially when English feels disconnected from their daily lives. This detachment may lead to passivity, reduced interest, and a significant decline in intrinsic motivation - an essential factor in sustaining long-term commitment and learning effectiveness.

The findings (see Figure 4) of this study also revealed the most common reasons why students learn English: "to get a job" (73.1%), followed by "for career advancement" (67.6%) and "for entertainment" (66.7%). These figures mostly reflect practical needs and the desire to expand career opportunities, particularly in the context of increasing global integration.



**Figure 4.** Participants' reasons for learning English

Besides the reasons mentioned above, this study also investigated students' specific motivations for learning a foreign language, particularly English. The data collected from participants (see Figure 5) revealed that instrumental motivation ranked highest, with "learning English for career advancement" accounting for 47.2%, followed by "learning English to get a job" (44.4%). Meanwhile, integrative motivation, such as "learning English because it is a global language," was reported by 34.3% of the students.



**Figure 5.** Participants' motivation for learning English

This division perfectly matches the socio-educational model (Gardner, 1985). According to Gardner, "the purpose of this model is not merely to describe a set of relationships, but to explain second language acquisition through empirically validated structures" (Gardner, 1985). These points indicate that learning English is not solely driven by personal interest or passion but also strongly reflects students' awareness of the role of English as an indispensable tool in the context of international globalization. Based on survey findings and comparisons, we observe that although students recognize the increasing importance of English in global communication and connection, and acknowledge that English is an excellent tool to support practical life and career development, their internal force (motivation) does not fully correspond to their level of awareness (reason). This demonstrates that the majority of motivation to learn English is directly related to social demands, such as the labor market and globalization trends, rather than personal passion or intrinsic interest in the language itself. Nevertheless, some intrinsic motivations, such as "learning English out of interest" (21.3%) and inspiration from teachers (25.9%), are still acknowledged. These figures remain at an average level; although not predominant, they reflect a certain level of student interests and the presence of emotional factors in the language learning process, even though these factors have yet to fully dominate the overall learning motivation.

This perspective is further reinforced by Gardner's (1985) study, in which he asserts that: "In the present context, motivation refers to the combination of effort, the desire to achieve the goal of learning the language, and favorable attitudes toward learning the language". This viewpoint once again emphasizes the close correlation between motivation and attitude in the process of second language acquisition.

These results indicate that intrinsic motivation should receive greater emphasis in teaching practices, serving as a foundation for educators to adjust and design pedagogical approaches that inspire creativity and personal passion. At the same time, it affirms that intrinsic motivation is a potential and equally important factor in promoting more sustainable language instruction and acquisition among students.



## 4.2. The role of instructors in shaping students' learning motivation

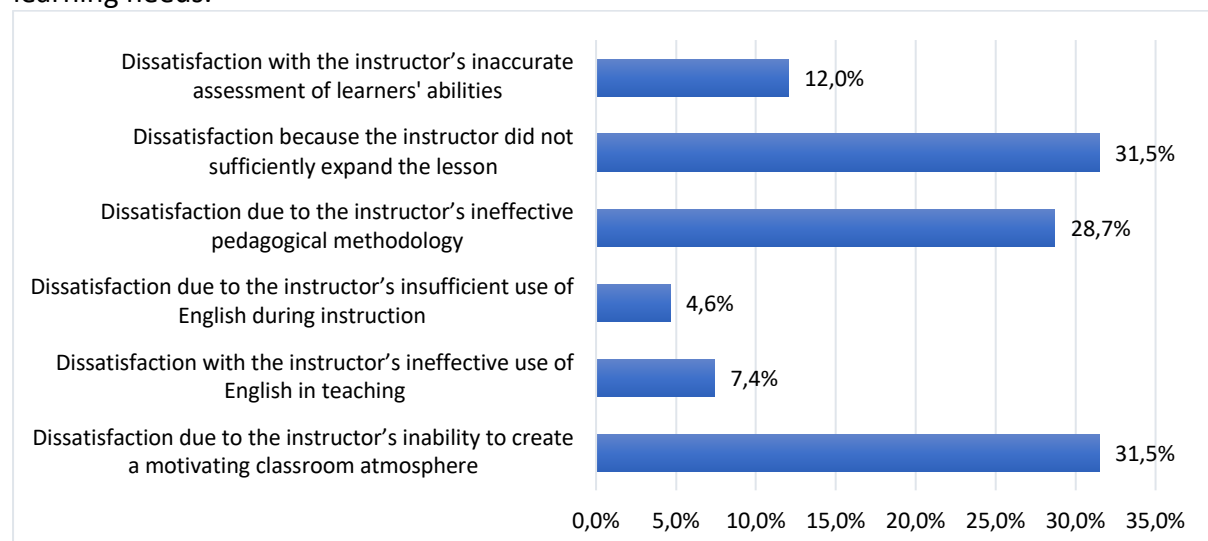
In the process of acquiring a foreign language in general, and English in particular, students are bound to encounter various challenges. Therefore, the role of instructors in guiding learners is of great importance - especially within the context of foreign language education in a domestic setting (Hoang, 2024a). The teaching methodology employed by instructors is also considered a key factor in encouraging learners to develop their foreign language competence. According to the collected data, the majority of students agreed that their instructors played a motivational role in enhancing their language learning. However, only 63.9% of students reported being satisfied with their instructors' teaching methods, and merely 14.8% fully endorsed the effectiveness of those methods. The remaining students expressed either uncertainty or dissatisfaction.

**Table 1.** Participants' satisfaction with teaching method

	Strongly dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Neutral	Satisfied	Strongly satisfied
Students' satisfaction with teaching method	0 0.0%	2 1.9%	21 19.4%	69 63.9%	16 14.8%

In the context of learning, students' attitudes are typically examined through their perceptions, emotional responses, and behaviors within the classroom environment (Hoang, 2024b). Therefore, it is inevitable that a portion of students express dissatisfaction with the instructors' teaching methods. Nevertheless, in many cases, learners' attitudes toward instructors serve as a pivotal factor in determining the effectiveness of knowledge acquisition in the classroom.

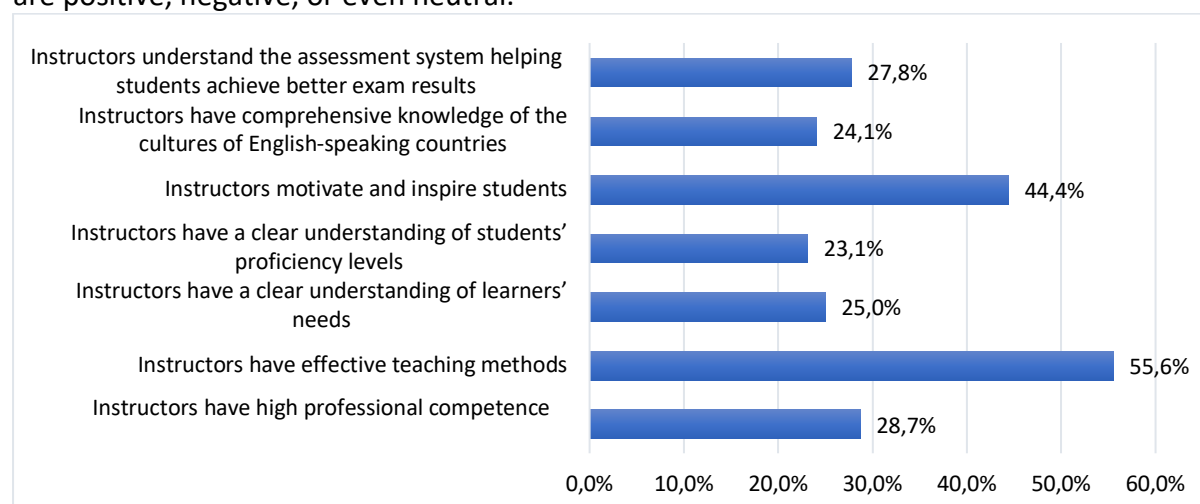
Based on the survey, students expressed certain concerns and dissatisfaction regarding the instructors' approach to lesson delivery. The results (see Figure 6) indicate that 31.5% of students believe that instructors have not established a comfortable classroom atmosphere nor expanded the scope of lessons to adequately meet students' learning needs.



**Figure 6.** Participants' reasons for dissatisfaction regarding the instructors' teaching method

The causes underlying the mentioned reasons can be attributed to two main factors: (1) Due to the limited class time, instructors have been unable to provide detailed guidance and in-depth the lessons coverage; (2) At the higher education level, students are expected to allocate more time to self-study and independent research. It is undeniable that language acquisition is a two-way process for university students. Therefore, the second aforementioned cause is attributed more to the students themselves rather than to external environmental factors. Currently, the number of students taking part-time jobs alongside their academic responsibilities is on the rise, which inevitably brings about certain negative effects on their learning (Wang & Chen, 2017). This trend has led to students becoming inattentive in their studies, frequently experiencing fatigue due to limited rest time, and, in some cases, skipping classes to work. As a result, the quality of their in-class learning and overall academic performance is significantly compromised. Thereby, this leads to a noticeable reduction in students' ability to absorb and retain instructional content delivered in class.

Moreover, at the undergraduate level, learners often develop their own study methods and strategies. However, when faced with more complex or advanced subject matter, the guidance provided by instructors becomes a particularly valued and prioritized factor. In such cases, students tend to place greater emphasis on instructional support than on other factors, regardless of whether their attitudes toward the classroom environment are positive, negative, or even neutral.



**Figure 7.** Participants' reasons for satisfaction

According to the survey results (see Figure 7), 55.6% of students emphasized the importance of teaching methods during class sessions, considering them as a direct factor influencing knowledge acquisition, concentration, and learning effectiveness. Thanks to instructors' strong emphasis on teaching methods in the classroom, students' attitudes during face-to-face sessions showed positive signs, as reflected in their active and voluntary participation in class activities. However, when it comes to English communication activities, language-major students tend to exhibit more hesitation compared to tasks involving reading and writing skills. A majority of students experience a fear of making mistakes, anxiety about speaking in a foreign language, or a lack of confidence in their own abilities - particularly in situations that involve interacting with native or foreign speakers. Additionally, this also reflects, to some extent, the underlying reason that most of the students are Vietnamese and therefore have limited opportunities to engage in direct

communication with native speakers. Furthermore, they often lack sufficient encouragement or motivation to practice their speaking skills regularly. Therefore, the study also acknowledges that, in addition to effective teaching methods, learners greatly benefit from having enthusiastic and inspiring teachers who can motivate them to fully realize their linguistic potential. When students are taught by teachers who are capable of inspiring and motivating the classroom, they tend to become more active, engaged, and self-directed in their approach to learning the language. Furthermore, a study conducted in Iraq by Altun (2017) indicates that, beyond enhancing students' motivation, teachers' passion for their profession also creates favorable conditions for the development of students' critical thinking, creativity, and a more positive learning attitude. Over time, these inspirational teachers increasingly serve as influential role models and sources of motivation for students, playing a key role in guiding them to establish clear professional goals and pursue their long-term career goals. In addition, regarding other factors such as teachers possessing strong expertise, having a clear understanding of students' needs in learning English, and being well aware of their proficiency levels, etc. although these accounted for a lower percentage, they exhibited a relatively even distribution. From the students' perspective, these aspects are generally considered essential qualities that competent teachers are expected to possess.

Overall, the fundamental objective of English language instructors is to support the development of students' communicative competence in both written and spoken forms. However, the learning process is always a two-way interaction, regardless of the subject being studied. To make further progress, students cannot solely rely on the support provided by their instructors; they must also take responsibility for enhancing and actively practicing their individual language skills.

#### **4.3. Discussion**

The research results reveal that instrumental motivation is significantly more prominent among second-year students of the English Faculty of Foreign Languages at Saigon University. The majority of students stated that their primary goal in improving foreign language proficiency, particularly in English, is to serve their future career orientation after graduation - specifically, to meet employer demands, enhance job opportunities, and increase income. This finding is entirely consistent with Gardner's (2005) study, which asserts that instrumental motivation surpasses other types of motivation and plays a dominant role in educational settings and students' career orientation. Besides that, most students regard the pedagogical methods as highly important to a degree, serving as the decisive factors during knowledge acquisition and lifelong learning process. Moreover, the data also reflects that contemporary teaching methods applied at universities have not completely demanded that students' holistic development and flexibility make it difficult to stimulate interest in learning English. At the same time, the content and visuals of instruction remain limited in real-life situations. Also, a dry theoretical approach which hinders students from maintaining long-term interest and active engagement in learning. Surprisingly, instrumental motivation is the most prominent factor influencing English learning, even though its transformation into practical actions remains unclear. Most students struggle to define specific goals and effective learning strategies, which leads to delayed progress and affects their ability to complete academic programs on time. From this, it can be seen that although students reported that instrumental motivation

predominates, without a clear orientation and an effective learning environment, this type of motivation is unlikely to develop in an optimal way.

## CONCLUSION

Motivation is the most important factor in enhancing the quality of learning across all subjects. Determining the purpose of learning English from the very beginning of choosing the major becomes a considered essential factor for all language major students. In fact, most students majoring in this field have already identified their motivation for learning English as being to serve their future careers after graduation. As the result, they tend to approach their specialized courses with a more proactive and positive attitude. However, based on direct observations in the classrooms, there are still some students who have not yet determined their future career path. This has led to a small number of students displaying shy, hesitant, and even somewhat passive attitudes during class activities. In the long run, this will significantly affect students' learning attitudes, their desire for personal development, and may also indirectly impact their future career advancement opportunities. Therefore, the role of the classroom instructor is also emphasized in this study. When instructors employ effective teaching methods, it not only improves the quality of instruction but also serves as a source of motivation that encourages learners to realize and develop their language potential. However, it is important to note that the learning environment and the support provided by instructors mainly influence students' attitudes during their time at university, rather than having a profound impact on their initial motivation to learn English. Therefore, identifying and understanding a motivation that truly aligns with their personal goals and aspirations is extremely important. Ultimately, this study still has certain limitations, as the results were primarily collected and analyzed within the scope of Saigon University, focusing solely on second-year students from the Faculty of Foreign Languages. Therefore, further research with broader scope, involving more diverse aspects and participant groups, is necessary to validate and generalize the findings of this study.

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