International Journal of Educational Development
ISSN Print: 3104-4263
ISSN Online: 3104-4271
CD ISSN: 3104-428X
https://doi.org/10.63313/IJED.9071

Exploration of Methods to Stimulate and Sustain Motivation for English Learning Among Secondary School Students

QiaoYue Shuai. Min Zhang*
School of Foreign Languages, China West Normal University, Nanchong, China

How to cite this paper: Shuai, Q. Y., & Zhang, M. (2026). Exploration of methods to stimulate and sustain motivation for English learning among secondary school students. International Journal of Educational Development, 3(2), 70–80. ISSN Print: 3104-4263, ISSN Online: 3104-4271.
https://doi.org/10.63313/IJED.9071
Published: 2026-05-21

Copyright © 2026 by author(s) and Erytis Publishing Limited.
This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution International License (CC BY 4.0).
http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/
CC BY 4.0

Abstract

Against the backdrop of globalization and deepening reforms in China's basic education, stimulating and sustaining motivation for English learning is central to enhancing secondary students' language proficiency and intercultural literacy. However, current secondary English instruction still faces widespread challenges, including insufficient intrinsic drive among students, motivation prone to frustration and decline, and difficulty in sustaining learning engagement. To address these issues, this paper aims to explore a systematic strategy capable of effectively stimulating and sustaining secondary students' motivation for English learning. This study proposes an integrated implementation plan centered on five core dimensions: optimizing instructional design, innovating teaching methods, refining assessment systems, addressing students'psychological needs, and constructing diverse support environments. It argues that the synergistic advancement of these multidimensional strategies can effectively stimulate students' intrinsic learning motivation and provide practical pathways for enhancing the quality of secondary English education.

Keywords

English learning motivation; Secondary school students; Motivation maintenance; Teaching strategies; Motivation stimulation

1. Introduction

1.1. Research Background

With accelerating globalization and increasingly frequent cross-cultural exchanges, the practical value of English as an international language has become increasingly prominent, and its status as a subject in basic education continues to solidify. The English Curriculum Standards for Senior High Schools (2017 Edition, Revised 2020) explicitly state that secondary English teaching should focus on cultivating students' core competencies, emphasize stimulating students' interest and initiative in

learning, and guide students in developing the ability and awareness for sustained learning. However, motivation-related issues remain prominent in current secondary English teaching practices: some teachers persist with traditional knowledge-transmission teaching models, where content is disconnected from students' real lives and teaching methods lack innovation. Adolescents in secondary school experience unique psychological development during puberty, making them susceptible to factors like learning difficulty, academic pressure, and external evaluations. These influences cause fluctuations in English learning motivation and may even lead to aversion toward the subject. These realities fall significantly short of curriculum standards and student developmental needs, necessitating targeted research to explore solutions.

1.2. Research Objectives

Grounded in secondary English teaching practice, this study clarifies the internal mechanisms and external factors influencing secondary students' English learning motivation through theoretical review and empirical research synthesis. By integrating relevant theories and existing research findings, it identifies gaps in current studies and teaching practices. Building on this foundation, it seeks to explore scientifically viable strategies for stimulating and sustaining learning motivation that are adaptable to secondary English teaching contexts. The aim is to provide concrete references for secondary English teachers to optimize teaching methods and adjust instructional design, thereby addressing issues such as insufficient motivation and poor persistence in students' English learning. This effort will contribute to enhancing the quality of secondary English education and effectively cultivating students' core English literacy.

1.3. Research Significance

1.3.1. Theoretical Significance

Learning motivation stands as a central topic in educational psychology and subject-specific teaching research. Existing studies predominantly focus on university students' English learning motivation or analyses of single motivational factors, leaving room for expansion in systematic research on motivation stimulation and maintenance strategies tailored to secondary school students. By integrating the psychological development characteristics of secondary students with the unique features of secondary English education, this study synthesizes multidisciplinary theories and existing research findings. It further enriches the research content in the field of secondary students' English learning motivation, refines the relevant research framework, and provides theoretical references and research approach support for subsequent similar studies.

1.3.2. Practical Significance

From a teaching practice perspective, the motivation stimulation and maintenance strategies explored in this study closely align with real-world scenarios such as secondary English classroom instruction and post-class reinforcement. They possess strong practical applicability, enabling secondary English teachers to directly adapt and apply them in teaching processes to optimize instructional design and enhance teaching outcomes. From the perspective of student development, scientifically effective methods for motivating and sustaining learning can help secondary students enhance their initiative and enthusiasm in English learning, alleviate learning anxiety, and cultivate self-directed learning abilities. This not only promotes improvements in English academic performance but also lays a solid foundation for their lifelong English learning and the development of cross-cultural communication skills.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Definition of Learning Motivation

Learning motivation is a core concept at the intersection of psychology and education. While academic definitions vary, their core essence remains consistent. Generally speaking, learning motivation refers to the sum of internal psychological drives and external factors that propel learners to actively engage in learning activities, sustain learning behaviors, and advance learning toward specific goals. Its core function is to regulate learners' attitudes and behaviors toward learning, thereby influencing learning efficiency and outcomes(Dörnyei, 2005). In the context of English language learning, motivation specifically denotes the psychological state and driving force that prompts learners to actively invest effort in English studies, persist in completing learning tasks, and achieve objectives such as accumulating English knowledge and enhancing language proficiency.

2.2. Research on English Learning Motivation

2.2.1. International Research on English Learning Motivation

International research on language learning motivation began early and developed mature theoretical frameworks, evolving from static classifications to dynamic systems and shifting from social psychological orientations to contextualized educational explorations. Early on, Gardner and Lambert (1972) pioneered a classification within their socio-educational model, distinguishing between integrative motivation (genuine interest in the target language culture and desire for integration) and instrumental motivation (learning for practical purposes like academic advancement or employment). This classic dichotomy long shaped the direction of second language motivation research. However, its emphasis on sociocultural contexts limited its explanatory power for learning motivation in typical classroom settings. To address this gap, Deci and Ryan (1985) proposed Self-Determination Theory (SDT) from a broader psychological needs perspective.

They identified three fundamental human psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Based on these, SDT conceptualizes motivation as a continuum ranging from amotivation and external regulation to intrinsic motivation. This theory emphasizes that supportive environments can help students internalize external goals, thereby fostering more stable and enduring learning motivation, providing direct and powerful guidance for teaching practice.

As globalization accelerates, the traditional integrated motivation concept faces challenges, giving rise to the self-system theory of second language motivation. Dörnyei (2005) integrated the psychological concept of the "potential self," proposing that this theory comprises three core dimensions: the "ideal second language self," the "should second language self," and the "second language learning experience." Extensive empirical research indicates that shaping and reinforcing students' "ideal second language self" (e.g., through future self-image guidance and role modeling) is a highly effective way to stimulate motivation. Building upon this foundation, Dörnyei's team further introduced the concept of "directed flow motivation" to describe motivational states that sustain learners' high engagement and effort over extended periods and at high intensity. Its characteristics include clear goals, structured tasks, and positive feedback.

2.2.2. Domestic Research on English Learning Motivation

Although research on English learning motivation in China began relatively late, it has developed rapidly, progressing from introducing and validating foreign theories to localized innovation, and from theoretical exploration to practical application. During the 1980s and 1990s, domestic research primarily focused on introducing and validating foreign theories. Scholars began applying Gardner & Lambert's theoretical framework to the Chinese English learning context, confirming the prominent role of instrumental motivation among Chinese learners(Gao et al., 2002). Empirical studies on English learning motivation largely followed classical and extended models, focusing on the relationship between motivation and academic achievement, as well as other learner factors(e.g., Shi , 1999; Wen , 2001; Wu & Liu, 1993).

Since the 21st century, research has increasingly integrated classroom teaching practices, yielding numerous empirical studies combining specific pedagogical approaches. For instance, investigations explore the effects of flipped classrooms, project-based learning, and cooperative learning on enhancing students' intrinsic motivation and classroom engagement. Research indicates that flipped classrooms significantly boost students' English learning motivation, prompting teachers to explore effective implementation strategies to improve learning outcomes(Wu, 2024). Particularly within the digital education context, research on technology-enabled motivation has gained prominence. Studies explore teaching optimization pathways across multiple dimensions—technology empowerment,

scenario construction, interactive deepening, and data-driven approaches—to enhance learning motivation(Han, 2025). In recent years, the introduction of self-determination theory and the self-system theory of second language motivation has broadened and deepened domestic research perspectives. For instance, studies indicate that teaching environments, family backgrounds, personal factors, and sociocultural influences significantly impact high school students' English learning motivation and self-efficacy. Therefore, strengthening multi-faceted collaboration is essential to enhance students' learning motivation(Shi, 2024).

2.3. Major Existing Issues

Comprehensive analysis of domestic and international research findings indicates that while progress has been made in studying secondary students' English learning motivation, common limitations persist, hindering full alignment with current secondary English teaching practices. First, research perspectives remain constrained. Overseas studies predominantly draw from local educational contexts and student characteristics, rendering some theories and strategies insufficiently adaptable to domestic secondary English teaching scenarios, necessitating further localization adjustments. Domestic research often overrelies on foreign theoretical frameworks, with limited innovative studies grounded in local teaching realities and a shortage of targeted practical solutions. Second, research lacks practical applicability. Extensive theoretical discussions often fail to translate into daily teaching practices that frontline teachers can readily understand and implement. Third, existing studies predominantly address short-term motivation enhancement, with limited research on long-term strategies for sustaining secondary students' English learning motivation—particularly strategies to manage motivation fluctuations during adolescence. Moreover, existing recommendations often appear fragmented, lacking a systematic framework that integrates curriculum content, teaching methods, assessment systems, and teacher-student relationships. This hinders addressing the core issue of insufficient motivational persistence.

3. Strategies for Stimulating and Sustaining Secondary Students' Motivation in English Learning

Stimulating and sustaining secondary students' motivation in English learning is a systemic endeavor requiring comprehensive design and sustained intervention across multiple dimensions: teaching content, methods, assessment, psychological support, and environmental construction. Effective strategies should not only focus on stimulating short-term interest but also strive to cultivate and sustain long-term intrinsic motivation.

3.1. Optimizing Instructional Design to Enhance Content Relevance and Practicality

The relevance and practicality of instructional content form the foundation for stimulating student interest. When students perceive connections between what they learn and their personal lives or future development, their learning motivation is more easily awakened and sustained.

3.1.1. Integrate Real-Life and Interest Elements to Enhance Practicality

In English teaching activities, teachers should focus on cultivating students' interest in learning English in order to improve the quality of English teaching and stimulate their English learning motivation(Zhang, 2020). Educators should transcend textbook limitations by consciously connecting language learning to students' daily lives, personal interests, and current social topics. For instance, when teaching food-related vocabulary, designing tasks like "simulating ordering at a Western restaurant" allows students to acquire practical communication skills while learning language. Adapting authentic materials centered on topics like films, music, sports, or technology—which resonate with students' interests—can help them intuitively grasp English's practical value, thereby strengthening their utility-driven motivation.

3.1.2. Implementing Tiered Content Design to Accommodate Ability Differences

Given significant disparities in students' English proficiency, uniform content may frustrate weaker learners with excessive difficulty or bore stronger ones with insufficient challenge. Teachers should stratify content based on pre-assessment results. For instance, under a shared reading theme, provide vocabulary annotations and simplified texts for foundational learners, design comprehension and summarization tasks for core-level students, and supplement critical thinking exercises or extended reading materials for advanced learners.

3.1.3. Supplementing Diverse Teaching Resources to Enrich Content Presentation

According to Input Hypothesis, comprehensible and engaging input is fundamental to motivating learners(Krashen,1982). Therefore, educators can actively incorporate varied teaching resources such as English news clips, science documentaries, audiobooks, English songs, comics, or high-quality online learning platform materials. For example, when teaching the "Environmental Protection" unit, incorporating National Geographic-related short films not only provides authentic language input but also deepens thematic understanding through powerful visual impact. The use of diverse resources makes teaching content more multidimensional and vivid, engaging and sustaining student attention through multiple sensory channels.

3.2. Innovating Teaching Methods and Models to Build Interactive

Learning Environments

Teaching methods serve as the bridge connecting content to students. Student-centered interactive and experiential learning environments can significantly enhance students' sense of classroom engagement and learning achievement.

3.2.1. Promoting Interactive Teaching Methods to Strengthen Classroom Engagement

Empirical research demonstrates that task-based language teaching significantly increases middle school students' classroom participation and motivation(Feng, 2021). Collaborative learning can cultivate students' teamwork spirit and competitive awareness, and stimulate their learning motivation(Liu, 2024). Therefore, teachers should reduce monologue-style instruction and vigorously promote interactive models such as Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT), Project-Based Learning (PBL), and cooperative learning(Dörnyei, Z., & Ushioda, E. , 2011). For example, assigning a project like "Planning a Campus English Culture Week" requires students to work in groups to complete a series of tasks including information gathering, plan design, promotional material creation, and on-site presentations. Throughout this process, students proactively use language for negotiation, collaboration, and expression to accomplish authentic tasks. Language learning becomes integrated into practice, fully activating their intrinsic and social motivations.

3.2.2. Integrating Digital Teaching Tools to Innovate Instructional Models

The information-based teaching environment can effectively maintain students' learning engagement through intelligent and personalized methods(Yang & Chen, 2025). Strategic use of digital technology can innovate teaching models while enhancing learning enjoyment and efficiency. Teachers can employ interactive whiteboard software for gamified competitions, utilize speech recognition tools to support oral practice, or leverage online collaboration platforms (e.g., Padlet) for brainstorming and outcome sharing. For instance, assigning dubbing exercises via educational apps allows students to imitate dialogue from favorite movie clips, with systems providing instant pronunciation feedback and scoring.

3.3. Refining the Assessment System to Strengthen Incentives and Holistic Evaluation

Assessment systems directly guide and regulate student motivation. Summative, singular evaluations tend to exacerbate anxiety and utilitarian tendencies, whereas formative assessments and diverse evaluators help students develop positive self-perception and enhance learning autonomy.

3.3.1. Expanding Assessment Dimensions to Cover the Entire Learning Process

Assessment should transcend traditional test scores to encompass multiple dimensions such as learning attitude, classroom participation, collaborative spirit, project outcomes, progress, and innovative thinking. Establish "learning portfolios" to systematically collect process-based materials like assignments, reflection journals, project reports, and performance videos. This holistic evaluation allows students to feel that every effort is seen and acknowledged, shifting their focus from rankings to personal growth and directing motivation toward the intrinsic value of learning.

3.3.2. Optimizing Evaluation Subjects and Methods to Enhance Targeted Assessment

Introduce diverse evaluation subjects by combining teacher assessments, student self-evaluations, and peer reviews. For instance, after group presentations, teams first conduct self- and peer-evaluations to articulate contributions and shortcomings. Other groups then provide feedback, followed by teachers delivering summative and developmental feedback. This approach enhances students' metacognitive abilities and sense of agency. Furthermore, specific, constructive feedback promotes sustained motivation and strategy adjustment more effectively than vague evaluations. For instance, stating "You used vivid adjectives in your description; next time, try incorporating more complex clause structures" is more effective than generic comments like "Good" or "Needs improvement."

3.4. Addressing Students' Psychological Needs and Strengthening Individualized Counseling

Learning motivation fundamentally stems from individual psychological needs. Teachers' attention to and fulfillment of students' psychological needs, coupled with support for autonomous decision-making and competence experiences, are key to stimulating and sustaining intrinsic motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

3.4.1. Enhancing Students' Self-Efficacy to Strengthen Intrinsic Motivation

Self-efficacy refers to students' confidence in their ability to successfully complete learning tasks, and step-by-step goal setting and positive attribution training can significantly enhance students' self-efficacy. Intervention studies based on theories such as self-determination have found a positive correlation between middle school students' self-efficacy and their English learning motivation. So teachers should give timely recognition to students' successful experiences and help them establish the belief of 'I can do it'(Ma, 2025).

3.4.2. Alleviating Learning Anxiety and Optimizing Psychological Well-being

Excessive learning anxiety, particularly classroom anxiety and test anxiety, can severely inhibit learning motivation. Educators should cultivate a low-threat, high-support classroom environment that fosters psychological safety, where

students are permitted to make mistakes and view errors as learning opportunities. Implement strategies such as guided relaxation exercises, teaching effective study techniques, and providing exam preparation coaching to help students manage anxiety. Clearly communicating assessment criteria to reduce uncertainty also contributes to lowering anxiety levels.

3.4.3. Implementing Personalized Guidance to Address Individual Needs

Teachers must recognize individual differences in learning styles, strengths, interests, and challenges. Understand students through post-class discussions, learning questionnaires, and one-on-one conversations to provide tailored advice and resources. For example, recommend visually rich materials for visual learners, design role-playing activities for kinesthetic learners, and create personalized tutoring and follow-up plans for students with low motivation due to weak foundations.

3.5. Building Diverse Support Systems to Strengthen External Environment Assurance

The stimulation and maintenance of learning motivation depend on a supportive external environment. A harmonious classroom atmosphere and a collaborative educational network provide students with sustained motivation.

3.5.1. Fostering a Harmonious Classroom Atmosphere to Enhance Teacher-Student and Peer Interactions

Teachers' emotional support and peer interactions are vital social resources for sustaining student motivation (Ushioda, 2008). Educators should employ encouraging language, demonstrate empathy, and treat every student fairly to build positive teacher-student relationships. Simultaneously, design group activities requiring close collaboration and establish group contracts to foster positive peer interactions. For example, regularly organize "English Learning Buddies" mutual assistance activities, pairing students of different proficiency levels to complete tasks together. Within this supportive environment, students' sense of belonging and social motivation are fulfilled, transforming learning into a more secure and socially rewarding experience.

3.5.2. Deepening Home-School Collaboration to Strengthen Educational Synergy

Home-school collaboration provides students with a stable language learning environment, supporting sustained long-term motivation. Schools should regularly communicate with parents through parent-teacher conferences, open houses, and online platforms to emphasize the importance of English learning, share teaching philosophies and methodologies, and guide parents toward setting reasonable expectations—focusing on the learning process rather than solely on grades.

Related studies have shown that parents' educational methods and cultural level are also closely related to students' learning motivation. Parents should be encouraged to create relaxed and natural English exposure opportunities at home, such as watching English movies, reading simple English books together, and set good examples for their children(Wang, 2023).

4. Conclusion

Stimulating and sustaining secondary students' motivation for English learning is a core issue concerning the essence of education and students' long-term development. This study demonstrates through literature review and strategy integration that this goal cannot be achieved through isolated techniques but requires a systematic transformation of the teaching paradigm. Its core lies in shifting the focus of teaching from the mechanical transmission of language knowledge to the comprehensive cultivation of learners' intrinsic motivation systems, strategic learning abilities, and cultural-cognitive literacy.

Educational administrators and teachers must re-evaluate the value positioning of English instruction, prioritizing learning motivation and autonomous learning abilities in curriculum design, teacher training, and assessment reforms. However, this study has limitations: the universality and long-term effectiveness of the proposed strategy framework require broader, longer-term empirical validation across diverse regions and schools with varying academic levels. Future research could employ longitudinal tracking designs to compare the long-term effects of different motivational intervention packages. Concurrently, process-oriented studies should deepen our understanding of teachers' motivational beliefs, emotional labor, and how these factors concretely influence classroom motivational practices. Looking ahead, the goal of secondary English education extends beyond preparing students to pass exams. It aims to cultivate lifelong learners who enjoy learning, excel at learning, and can effectively tell China's stories and engage in global dialogue using authentic language. Only by truly igniting and safeguarding the flame of learning within students can this vision be realized.

References

[1] Gardner, R. C., & Lambert, W. E. (1972). Attitudes and Motivation in Second-Language Learning. Rowley, MA: Newbury House Publishers.

[2] Deci, E. L., & Ryan, R. M. (1985). Intrinsic Motivation and Self-Determination in Human Behavior. New York: Plenum Press.

[3] Dörnyei, Z., & Ushioda, E. (2011). Teaching and Researching: Motivation (2nd ed.). Pearson Education.

[4] Dörnyei, Z. (2005). The Psychology of the Language Learner: Individual Differences in Second Language Acquisition. Routledge.

[5] Feng, M. (2021). The Effects of Task-Based Teaching on Middle School Students' English Learning Motivation and Anxiety. Hunan Agricultural University.

[6] Gao, Y., Zhao, Y., chen, Y., & Zhou, Y. (2002). The Relationship Between Types of English

Learning Motivation and Changes in Self-Identity Among Undergraduate Students. Foreign Language Teaching Abroad, (04), 18–24.

[7] Han, J. (2025). The Impact of Blended Learning on English Learning Motivation Among Junior High School Students. China New Telecommunications, 27(14), 188-190+193.

[8] Krashen, S. D. (1982). Principles and Practice in Second Language Acquisition. Pergamon Press.

[9] Liu, Z. (2024). The Relationship Between Learning Motivation and Learning Strategies in Junior High School Students' English Learning. Contemporary Family Education, (19), 101–103.

[10] Ma, J. (2025). A Study on the Correlation Between English Learning Motivation and Self-Efficacy Among Junior High School Students. Jilin International Studies University.

[11] Ryan Richard, M., & Deci, E. L. (2000). Self-determination theory and the facilitation of intrinsic motivation, social development, and well-being. American Psychologist, 55(1), 68-78.

[12] Shi, A. (2024). A Study on the Relationship Between English Learning Motivation and Self-Efficacy Among High School Students. English on Campus, (08), 22–24.

[13] Ushioda, E. (2008). Motivation and good language learners. In C. Griffiths (Ed.), Lessons from good language learners (pp. 19–34). Cambridge University Press.

[14] Wang, J. (2023). On Stimulating and Cultivating Motivation for English Learning Among High School Students. English Teachers, 23(01), 137–140.

[15] Wu, C. (2024). A Study on Enhancing College Students' Motivation in English Learning under the Flipped Classroom Model. English on Campus, (35), 6–8.

[16] Wu, Y., & Liu, R. (1993). Survey Report on the Quality of Undergraduate English Students in China. Foreign Language Teaching and Research (Bimonthly Journal of Foreign Languages), (01), 36–46.

[17] Yang, Y., & Chen, Z. (2025). A Study on the Cultivation of English Learning Motivation and Communicative Intentions Among University Learners in an Artificial Intelligence Environment. PEARL Materials, (16), 177–179.

[18] Zhang, Y. (2020). Strategies for Motivating Middle School Students in English Classrooms. English Pictorial (Junior High Edition), (11), 53–55.