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A Study on the Influence Mechanism of Student Learning Motivation on Academic Achievement in Primary and Secondary English Education

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Abstract: The relationship between student learning motivation and academic achievement has always been an important topic in educational research within the context of primary and secondary English education. Based on a review of fundamental theories of learning motivation, this paper analyzes the types and characteristics of English learning motivation at the primary and secondary school levels, explores the direct and indirect mechanisms through which motivation influences academic achievement, and examines the moderating effects of educational contextual factors such as teachers, families, and peers. The research finds that learning motivation affects academic achievement by influencing students' behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement; intrinsic motivation promotes deep learning more effectively than extrinsic motivation; teacher support, family environment, and peer interaction play significant moderating roles in the motivation transformation process. Based on these findings, this paper proposes teaching suggestions for stimulating and sustaining students' English learning motivation and enhancing their academic achievement.

Keywords: English learning motivation; academic achievement; learning engagement; primary and secondary English education; influence mechanism

1. Introduction

With the acceleration of globalization, English, as an international lingua franca, has increasingly prominent educational value. In China's basic education stage, English is listed as one of the core subjects, and students' academic achievement in English not only affects their competitiveness in further education but also influences their future development opportunities. However, a common challenge in primary and secondary English teaching practice is that some students lack learning motivation, resulting in poor English learning outcomes. This phenomenon prompts researchers to ponder deeply: How exactly does learning motivation affect academic achievement? What is its mechanism of action?

Learning motivation, as the internal force that initiates, maintains, and regulates learning behavior, is considered a key affective factor influencing academic achievement. Existing research has shown that learning motivation not only directly affects students' degree of learning engagement and choice of learning strategies but also indirectly affects learning outcomes by regulating cognitive processes and emotional experiences [1]. However, within the specific context of primary and secondary English education, the pathway through which motivation affects achievement has its particularities-factors such as the non-native language learning environment of English as a foreign language, the cognitive development characteristics of students at different school stages, and

Received: 08 January 2026

Revised: 25 February 2026

Accepted: 09 March 2026

Published: 13 March 2026



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disparities in urban and rural educational resources may all alter the pattern of the relationship between motivation and achievement.

This paper aims to systematically explore the influence mechanism of student learning motivation on academic achievement in primary and secondary English education. It first reviews the basic theories of learning motivation, then analyzes the types and characteristics of English learning motivation at the primary and secondary levels, reveals the internal pathways through which motivation affects academic achievement, and finally examines the moderating role of educational contextual factors, with the aim of providing a theoretical basis for optimizing English teaching practice.

2. Basic Theories and Types of Learning Motivation

2.1 The Connotation of Learning Motivation

Learning motivation refers to the internal psychological process or internal dynamic system that initiates and sustains learning activities, directing them toward specific academic goals. It answers the question of "why learn" and involves four dimensions of learning behavior: initiation, direction, intensity, and persistence. In the context of English learning, motivation is specifically manifested in students' interest in learning English, their willingness to engage in English learning activities, and their perseverance in overcoming learning difficulties.

2.2 Overview of Classical Motivation Theories

Regarding the explanation of learning motivation, several classical theories have been formed in the field of psychology. Self-determination theory distinguishes between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation: intrinsic motivation stems from the pleasure and satisfaction derived from the learning activity itself, such as curiosity and the desire to explore English language and culture; extrinsic motivation, on the other hand, points to outcomes outside the learning activity, such as obtaining good grades, avoiding punishment, or pleasing parents [2]. Expectancy-value theory posits that an individual's learning motivation depends on their expectation of success and their judgment of the task's value: when students believe they can learn English well (high expectancy) and consider learning English valuable (high value), their learning motivation will be stronger. Attribution theory focuses on students' explanations for their academic successes and failures: students who attribute success to effort and ability are more likely to maintain learning motivation, while those who attribute failure to uncontrollable factors are prone to learned helplessness.

2.3 Types of English Learning Motivation in Primary and Secondary Schools

In the context of primary and secondary English education, learning motivation exhibits diverse types. Research on Chinese students' English learning motivation has found that motivation types can be summarized into multiple dimensions, including intrinsic interest, grades, learning situation, studying abroad, social responsibility, and personal development [3]. From the perspective of motivation sources, it can be divided into internally interest-driven motivation (e.g., liking English songs, movies), externally pressure-driven motivation (e.g., entrance examination requirements, parental expectations), and achievement-oriented motivation (e.g., hoping to get good grades, receiving teacher praise). From a developmental perspective, elementary school students' English learning is mostly driven by direct interest, junior high school students begin to show an increase in instrumental motivation, and senior high school students form a complex motivational structure under the pressure of college entrance examinations.

3. Analysis of the Characteristics of English Learning Motivation in Primary and Secondary Schools

3.1 Developmental Characteristics by School Stage

The primary and secondary stages are critical periods for students' cognitive development and personality formation, and English learning motivation also shows distinct age-related stage characteristics. In the elementary school stage, students' English learning motivation is mostly based on direct interest; external stimuli such as the novelty of classroom activities, the teacher's affinity, and the fun of games can effectively stimulate learning enthusiasm. However, this kind of motivation is relatively shallow and unstable, easily fluctuating with situational changes.

Upon entering junior high school, with the increase in curriculum difficulty and the standardization of the evaluation system, students' English learning motivation begins to differentiate. Some students maintain or even enhance their learning motivation due to continuous successful experiences, while others experience motivational decline due to repeated setbacks. Research indicates that the second year of junior high school (Grade 8) is a significant turning point for motivational decline, which is related to factors such as a sharp increase in curriculum difficulty, the awakening of students' self-awareness, and intensified peer comparison.

In the senior high school stage, students face the realistic pressure of the college entrance examination, and instrumental motivation significantly increases. At the same time, with the enhancement of cognitive abilities and reflection on the future, some students begin to form relatively stable values regarding English learning, connecting English learning with personal development goals, thereby generating more enduring deep-seated motivation.

3.2 Characteristics of Gender Differences

Gender differences are widely observed in English learning motivation and have been discussed extensively in studies on language learning and educational psychology. A large body of research suggests that female students tend to demonstrate higher levels of intrinsic interest in language learning, stronger learning persistence, and more positive emotional engagement during the learning process. They are often more willing to participate in communicative activities, complete language-related tasks, and maintain consistent effort over time. These characteristics contribute to relatively stable motivational patterns in English learning.

Several factors may explain the formation of such gender differences. On the one hand, the influence of gender role expectations in the process of socialization plays an important role. In many educational and cultural contexts, language learning is often implicitly associated with traits such as communication, expression, and empathy, which are traditionally regarded as more consistent with socially constructed female characteristics. This perception may encourage girls to develop stronger identification with language-related subjects, thereby fostering higher levels of engagement and motivation.

On the other hand, differences in early language development may also contribute to this phenomenon. Some research indicates that girls tend to show advantages in verbal expression and language-related cognitive skills during early developmental stages. These early successes may lead to more positive learning experiences in language classes, which in turn strengthen learners' confidence and intrinsic motivation through a process of positive reinforcement. As learners accumulate successful experiences, their willingness to invest effort and persist in language learning activities may further increase.

However, gender differences in learning motivation should not be regarded as fixed or deterministic. Educational environments and instructional practices play a significant role in shaping students' motivational orientations. Factors such as teaching strategies, classroom interaction patterns, task design, and teacher expectations can substantially influence students' engagement in language learning. When teachers adopt inclusive teaching approaches, provide equal encouragement, and design learning activities that appeal to diverse interests, the motivational gap between male and female students can

be effectively reduced. In some cases, appropriate pedagogical interventions may even eliminate the observable differences in learning motivation across genders.

3.3 Characteristics of Urban-Rural Differences

Disparities in urban and rural educational resources profoundly affect students' English learning motivation. Urban students often have access to richer English learning resources—such as foreign teacher courses, English training classes, original reading materials, and international exchange opportunities—which not only provide more language input but also shape a more positive English learning experience. In contrast, rural students' English learning is mostly confined to the classroom, lacking authentic language use scenarios, making them prone to forming an instrumental cognition of "learning English just for exams," where intrinsic interest is difficult to effectively stimulate.

A more profound impact lies in how different learning environments shape students' different perceptions of English. Urban students are more likely to see English as a bridge to the world, forming integrative motivation; rural students tend to view English more as a tool for academic competition, resulting in a relatively singular type of motivation. If this difference is not effectively addressed, it will continue to widen the academic achievement gap between urban and rural students over the long-term learning process.

4. The Influence Mechanism of Learning Motivation on Academic Achievement

4.1 Direct Influence: Motivation Driving Learning Behavior

The most direct influence of learning motivation on academic achievement is reflected in the initiation and maintenance of learning behavior. Students with high motivation levels are more willing to actively engage in English learning, are more focused in class, are more conscientious in reviewing after class, and show greater persistence when facing difficulties. This accumulation of sustained learning behavior naturally leads to better academic performance. Conversely, students with insufficient motivation often exhibit passive learning behavior, engage superficially, and struggle to form effective knowledge accumulation.

However, the direct influence of motivation on achievement is not a simple linear relationship. Moderate high motivation is beneficial for learning, but excessively strong motivation—especially anxiety-driven motivation caused by external pressure—may instead interfere with cognitive processing and reduce learning efficiency. This suggests that the "quality" of motivation is more important than its "quantity."

4.2 Indirect Influence: The Mediating Role of Learning Engagement

Learning engagement is a key mediating variable connecting motivation and achievement. Learning engagement includes three dimensions: behavioral engagement, emotional engagement, and cognitive engagement. Behavioral engagement refers to students' degree of participation in learning activities, such as classroom attentiveness, homework completion, and extracurricular expansion. Emotional engagement refers to students' emotional experiences during the learning process, such as interest, sense of belonging, and value identification. Cognitive engagement refers to the learning strategies students use and the depth of their thinking processing, such as metacognitive monitoring, deep understanding, and critical thinking.

The pathway through which motivation indirectly affects academic achievement via learning engagement has received support from empirical research. Studies have shown that learning engagement plays a partial mediating role between motivation and academic achievement, meaning motivation both directly affects achievement and indirectly affects it through learning engagement [4]. In this chain, learning engagement is the necessary path for motivation to transform into achievement—no matter how strong

the motivation, if it cannot be translated into actual learning engagement, it is difficult to improve academic achievement.

It is worth noting that different types of motivation have different effects on the dimensions of learning engagement. Intrinsic motivation has a stronger predictive power for emotional engagement and deep cognitive engagement, while extrinsic motivation primarily drives behavioral engagement but has a limited promoting effect on deep cognitive processing. This explains why two equally "hardworking" students may still differ in academic achievement: one is actively engaged because they genuinely enjoy it, the other is forced to engage for fear of punishment, resulting in different depths of cognitive processing and learning outcomes.

4.3 Moderating Mechanisms: The Role of Educational Context

The influence of motivation on achievement does not occur in a vacuum but is embedded within specific educational contexts. Teacher support, family environment, and peer interaction are three important contextual moderating factors.

Teacher support is key to influencing the effectiveness of motivation transformation. When teachers can create a safe classroom atmosphere, provide appropriate challenges, and offer timely feedback, students' motivation is more likely to translate into positive learning engagement. Research has pointed out that the influence of teacher expectations on student academic achievement is a self-fulfilling prophecy process [5-7]. Conversely, in classrooms with excessive control and monotonous evaluation, even students with original intrinsic interest may suffer motivational damage due to thwarted autonomy.

The moderating role of the family environment is equally important. Parental expectation levels, methods of educational involvement, and the provision of family learning resources all shape students' motivational structures and the effectiveness of motivation transformation. Research indicates that autonomy-supportive family education (respecting children's interests, providing choices, explaining the meaning of requirements) is more conducive to maintaining intrinsic motivation and enhancing academic achievement than controlling family education [8].

The role of peer interaction in the motivation transformation process is receiving increasing attention. In the English learning context, peers are both collaborators and objects of comparison [9]. Positive peer interaction-such as cooperative learning, language exchange, and joint problem-solving-can enhance the fun and sense of belonging in learning, strengthening the transformation of motivation into engagement. Excessive peer competition, however, may weaken intrinsic motivation, shifting students' focus from learning itself to social comparison.

5. Educational Implications and Teaching Suggestions

Based on the above analysis, primary and secondary English teaching can focus on the following aspects to stimulate and sustain students' learning motivation and enhance their academic achievement.

First, focus on cultivating intrinsic motivation. Intrinsic motivation is the fundamental driver of lasting learning, and teaching should explore the inherent interest and meaningfulness of English learning as much as possible. Specifically, this can be achieved by introducing authentic language materials (English songs, movie clips, original picture books), designing meaningful communicative tasks, and creating language use situations close to students' lives, allowing students to experience the value of English learning firsthand [10].

Second, pay attention to the multidimensional promotion of learning engagement. The transformation of motivation into achievement requires learning engagement as a bridge. Teaching should focus not only on whether students are "learning or not" (behavioral engagement) but also on "how they learn" (cognitive engagement) and "whether they enjoy learning" (emotional engagement). Guiding students to master

effective learning strategies, cultivating metacognitive abilities, and creating a positive emotional atmosphere are all important ways to improve the quality of learning engagement.

Third, implement differentiated motivational interventions. For students at different school stages, of different genders, and with different learning levels, differentiated motivation-stimulating strategies should be adopted. For elementary students, the focus should be on protecting curiosity and direct interest; for junior high school students, help is needed to establish stable self-efficacy; for senior high school students, guidance should be provided to connect English learning with future development goals. For students with insufficient motivation, one can start by improving their learning experience; for students with excessive anxiety, external pressure needs to be reduced, guiding them to focus on the learning process rather than the outcome.

Fourth, optimize the moderating role of the educational context. Teachers should strive to become autonomy-supportive guides, reducing controlling language, increasing choice, and explaining the rationale behind requirements. Parents should create a positive language learning environment, provide appropriate resource support, and avoid excessive interference and overly high expectations. Among peers, cooperative learning should be advocated, reducing unhealthy competition, and making English learning a shared growth experience.

6. Conclusion

Learning motivation is an affective variable that cannot be ignored in primary and secondary English education. It profoundly affects students' academic achievement by influencing the quality and quantity of learning engagement. Intrinsic and extrinsic motivation each have their roles, but intrinsic motivation promotes deep learning more persistently and effectively. The transformation process of motivation is embedded in specific educational contexts, with teachers, families, and peers forming a moderating network that affects motivational outcomes. Understanding the mechanism of motivation's influence on achievement helps educators more targetedly stimulate and sustain students' learning motivation in teaching practice, enabling every student to gain the power of growth through English learning.

It is worth noting that the relationship between motivation and achievement is a dynamic interactive process—achievement can reciprocally affect motivation, forming either a virtuous or vicious cycle. Helping students establish positive English learning experiences, enabling them to gain confidence from achievement and enhance motivation through confidence, may be the most worthwhile goal of English education. Research has pointed out that the relationship between English learning motivation and academic achievement is moderated by various factors, requiring educators to continuously explore and optimize in practice. Against the backdrop of continuously promoting educational equity and quality improvement, how to ensure that students from different regions and family backgrounds can possess positive English learning motivation remains a topic worthy of further study.

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