

Factors Contributing to Undergraduates' Motivation to Learn the English Language at Selected Universities in Cambodia

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the factors influencing undergraduate students' motivation to learn English at three selected Cambodian universities: the National University of Cheasim Kamchaymear (NUCK), Svay Rieng University (SRU), and the University of Heng Samrin Tboung Khmum (UHST). The objective was to assess the levels of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation among students and examine their attitudes toward English learning. A quantitative research design was employed using a structured questionnaire, and data were collected from 101 undergraduates through convenience sampling. Results reveal that intrinsic motivation—such as personal interest, enjoyment, and curiosity—strongly correlates with students' engagement in English learning. Extrinsic factors, including career aspirations and social expectations, also play a significant role, though to a slightly lesser extent. Additionally, while most students perceive English as essential for communication and future success, confidence in speaking varies across participants. This aligns with studies highlighting how social support and willingness to communicate impact learners' confidence and participation in the language learning environment. The findings provide practical insights for educators and policymakers to design more targeted interventions that support both motivational dimensions, ultimately enhancing English language education in Cambodia.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The English language continues to be a dominant global medium for academic, economic, and diplomatic exchange. In the context of Southeast Asia, particularly Cambodia, the strategic importance of English has increased due to the country's integration into the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), its expansion in international trade, and the rise in tourism and foreign investment. As such, English proficiency is not merely a skill but a necessity for participation in globalised economic and educational systems [1], [2]. English is no longer simply a foreign language but a key to educational and

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career mobility, social advancement, and national development [3]. Despite government efforts to integrate English education into national policy frameworks, such as the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport's (MoEYS) 2020 guidelines, motivation among undergraduates to learn English remains inconsistently studied and supported [2].

The central problem addressed by this study is the lack of comprehensive, localised data on what motivates Cambodian undergraduates to learn English. Prior research has typically focused on Western or generalised Asian contexts, which limits the applicability of findings to Cambodia's unique cultural and socioeconomic environment [4]. Moreover, while some Cambodian-based studies exist, they often overlook the dynamic interplay of intrinsic and extrinsic motivational factors within provincial universities [5], [6]. This study aims to fill that gap by examining both internal motivators—such as curiosity, enjoyment, and personal growth—and external drivers, including employment opportunities and societal expectations.

To solve this problem, the study employs a quantitative method using structured questionnaires distributed to students at three provincial public universities: the National University of Cheasim Kamchaymea (NUCK), Svay Rieng University (SRU), and the University of Heng Samrin Thboug Khmum (UHST). By utilising Self-Determination Theory [7], the research categorises motivation into intrinsic and extrinsic dimensions, seeking to understand their influence on English language learning. This theoretical model is highly suitable for this context, as it allows the analysis of how autonomy, competence, and relatedness contribute to students' motivation [8]. In addition, Ushioda emphasises the role of learner identity and autonomy in sustaining motivation, which complements the Self-Determination Theory (SDT) perspective used in this study.

The objective of this study is fourfold:

- a. To assess the level of undergraduates' intrinsic motivation to learn the English language at NUCK, SRU, and UHST.
- b. To assess the level of undergraduates' extrinsic motivation to learn the English language at NUCK, SRU, and UHST.
- c. To explore undergraduates' attitudes toward learning the English language at NUCK, SRU, and UHST.
- d. To investigate if there is a significant difference in perception between male and female students.

These objectives aim to provide policymakers and educators with targeted insights that can help design more effective interventions tailored to the specific needs of Cambodian learners. It also contributes to broader discussions on learner identity, motivation, and educational equity in the Global South [9].

Previous studies in Vietnam and Indonesia [4], [10] have shown that both intrinsic and extrinsic motivators play substantial roles in language acquisition, but cultural and infrastructural differences make it imperative to conduct localised research. Additionally, comparative research by Zhang demonstrates how differences in urban-rural linguistic environments affect motivation and English performance among Chinese college students, an aspect this study addresses by focusing on less-urbanised provincial institutions in

Cambodia [11]. Therefore, this study presents a significant extension to existing literature and proposes a novel understanding of how context-sensitive factors influence English learning motivation in Cambodia.

The anticipated benefit of this research is multifaceted. For educators, it will help refine pedagogical approaches by aligning them with students' motivational triggers. For policymakers, it offers data-driven insights to guide curriculum reforms. For the academic community, it contributes to the relatively sparse body of empirical literature on English language learning motivation in the Cambodian context. In doing so, it sets the foundation for more nuanced and effective strategies for language instruction, ultimately enhancing Cambodia's capacity to engage globally.

2. METHOD

This study employed a quantitative survey design to systematically investigate the intrinsic and extrinsic motivational factors influencing the motivation of Cambodian undergraduates to learn English. The research was conducted across three selected public universities in Cambodia: the National University of Cheasim Kamchaymear (NUCK), Svay Rieng University (SRU), and the University of Heng Samrin Thboug Khmum (UHST). The design was cross-sectional and descriptive, employing structured questionnaires to gather data at a single point in time from a convenience sample of 101 undergraduates.

2.1 Research Design

A descriptive survey method was employed, utilising a structured questionnaire as the primary data collection tool. This method is suitable for identifying patterns and relationships in motivational factors among large groups of students [12]. The research aimed to capture the levels of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, as well as students' attitudes toward learning the English language.

2.2 Research Procedure

The research followed a structured process aligned with best practices in scientific inquiry and is summarised below.

- 1 Algorithm 1. Research Chronology
 - 2 Define research problem, scope, and objectives.
 - 3 Conduct a theoretical and empirical literature review.
 - 4 Develop a questionnaire based on Self-Determination Theory [7].
 - 5 Validate the questionnaire with expert input and pilot testing.
 - 6 Obtain research ethics approval from the involved institutions.
 - 7 Distribute questionnaires to participants using convenience sampling.
 - 8 Collect completed questionnaires and prepare data for analysis.
 - 9 Perform data entry, cleaning, and statistical analysis.
 - 10 Interpret the results and conclude.
 - 11 Report findings and suggest implications and future directions.
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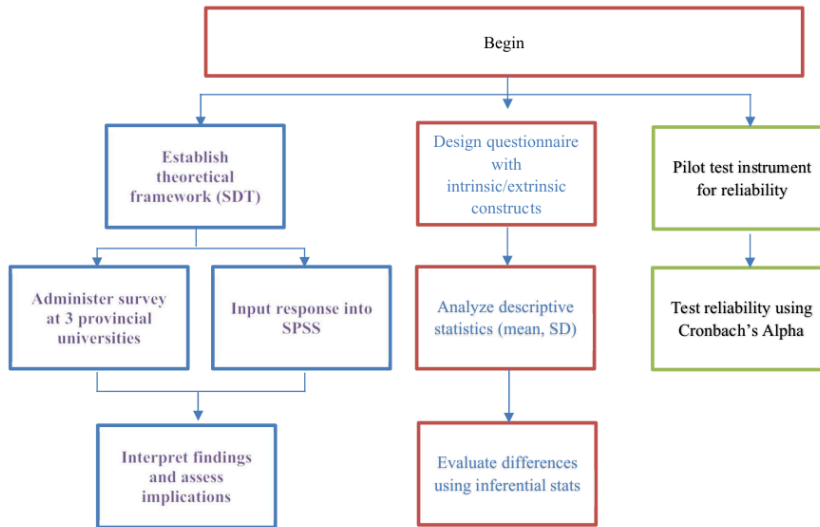


Figure 1: Research Procedure

2.3 Data Collection and Testing Procedures

The data were collected using a structured, self-administered questionnaire containing 5-point Likert-scale items. The instrument covered three core constructs: intrinsic motivation (e.g., interest, curiosity), extrinsic motivation (e.g., career goals, academic requirements), and attitudes toward English learning. The items were adapted from validated sources [4], [10] and aligned with the revised Bloom's Taxonomy cognitive process dimensions [13], as shown in Figure 1.

To test the validity and reliability of the instrument:

Construct validity was assessed through expert reviews during pilot testing.

Internal consistency reliability was evaluated using Cronbach's Alpha.

Reliability scores were:

Intrinsic motivation: 0.800

Extrinsic motivation: 0.649

Attitudes toward English learning: 0.634

These values meet the minimum acceptable thresholds [14].

Table 1. Internal Consistency Reliability of Motivation Constructs

Constructs	Number of Statements	Cronbach's alpha
Intrinsic	6	0.800
Extrinsic	6	0.649
Attitudes toward English learning	4	0.634
Constructs	Number of Statements	Cronbach's alpha

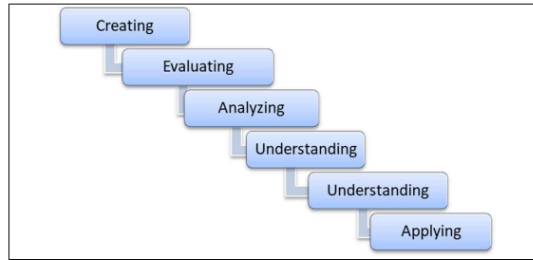


Figure 2: Cognitive Process Dimension

7 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This chapter presents the study's findings, along with a comprehensive discussion. The results are derived from the data collected through questionnaires distributed to undergraduates at the National University of Cheasim Kamchaymear (NUCK), Svay Rieng University (SRU), and University of Heng Samrin Tboung Khmum (UHST). For clarity and better comprehension, the findings are presented using tables, descriptive statistics, and figures, where appropriate. The discussion is organised into multiple sub-sections corresponding to the research objectives and questions, enabling a thorough analysis of both intrinsic and extrinsic motivational factors, as well as students' attitudes toward learning English.

3.1 Level of Intrinsic Motivation

The results reveal that Cambodian undergraduate students exhibit a high level of intrinsic motivation toward learning English, as indicated by a mean score of 4.02 (SD = 0.44) on a 5-point Likert scale. This suggests that students are personally engaged in English learning due to factors such as enjoyment, curiosity, and a genuine interest, rather than external rewards.

The reliability of this construct is confirmed by a Cronbach's Alpha of .800, which exceeds the generally accepted threshold of .70 for internal consistency [14]. This supports the trustworthiness of the data and indicates that the questionnaire items related to intrinsic motivation are well-aligned.

From a theoretical perspective, these findings strongly align with Self-Determination Theory (SDT) [7], which emphasises autonomy and personal relevance as key factors in sustaining motivation. The high intrinsic scores observed in this Cambodian context suggest that even in under-resourced or rural settings, learners may still be motivated by internal goals, especially when language learning is linked to personal meaning or cultural aspiration.

The relatively low standard deviation (0.44) also suggests consistency across participants, implying that intrinsic motivation may be a shared psychological characteristic among undergraduates in these institutions.

In sum, this section establishes that intrinsic motivation plays a central and reliable role in students' engagement with English, providing a critical foundation for further pedagogical strategies aimed at nurturing this internal drive.

Table 2. Level of Intrinsic Motivation

Statement	Mean	Std. Deviation	Cronbach's Alpha
Enjoyment of learning English	4.10	0.48	
Curiosity about the English language	3.95	0.42	
Interest in English-related content	4.01	0.43	
Overall Intrinsic Motivation	4.02	0.44	0.800

3.2 Level of Extrinsic Motivation

The results indicate that undergraduate students in the study exhibited a moderate level of extrinsic motivation in learning English, with an overall mean score of 3.41 (SD = 0.50). This indicates that while external drivers—such as employment prospects, academic requirements, and social expectations—are present, they are not as influential as intrinsic factors in motivating students to learn English.

Cronbach's alpha = .649 suggests acceptable reliability for exploratory research, although it is lower than the threshold typically considered strong (>.70). This may indicate that students' extrinsic motivators are more variable or situationally dependent, as also observed in similar regional research [10].

Table 3. Descriptive Statistics for Extrinsic Motivation Indicators

Item	Mean	SD	Cronbach's Alpha
Learning English for career advancement	3.45	0.52	
Pressure from academic requirements	3.40	0.49	
Expectations from family or society	3.38	0.50	
Overall Extrinsic Motivation	3.41	0.50	0.649

Table 3 supports this by breaking down individual motivators:

Career advancement had the highest individual mean (3.45), showing that job prospects are a strong driver.

Academic and societal pressures followed closely, reflecting cultural expectations and institutional demands.

In line with Self-Determination Theory, extrinsic motivation in this context may be classified as controlled motivation, where actions are driven by external contingencies rather than internalised goals [15]. This pattern suggests a need for curriculum strategies that help transform these external pressures into more internalised, self-endorsed motivations.

In conclusion, while extrinsic motivation is present, its relative weakness compared to intrinsic motivation highlights a pedagogical opportunity: aligning external goals (e.g., employability) with learners' interests and autonomy.

3.3 Attitudes Toward Learning English

The results for attitudes toward English learning reflect a moderately positive disposition among Cambodian undergraduates, with a mean score of 3.76 (SD = 0.46). This implies that students generally perceive English as valuable and beneficial in terms of communication, academic access, and self-confidence.

Table 4. Descriptive Statistics for Attitudes Toward Learning English

Item	Mean	SD	Cronbach's Alpha
English is important for global communication	3.85	0.48	
English helps in accessing knowledge and opportunities	3.72	0.45	
I feel confident when using English in daily life	3.71	0.44	
Overall Attitudes Toward English Learning	3.76	0.46	0.634

The breakdown in Table 4 shows that:

The highest-scoring item, “English is important for global communication” (M = 3.85), reflects the instrumental role English plays in students’ worldview and aspirations.

Confidence in daily use scored lower (M = 3.71), suggesting a possible affective barrier or lack of communicative practice despite positive beliefs.

With Cronbach’s Alpha = .634, reliability is acceptable for exploratory research, though slightly below the ideal threshold. This could reflect the diversity in students’ exposure to and experience with the English language, which affects their affective attitudes toward the language.

A strong correlation ($r = .62, p < .01$) between intrinsic motivation and positive attitudes reveals that students who enjoy learning English or are curious about it are more likely to hold favourable views of its usefulness. This supports Self-Determination Theory, which suggests that intrinsic motivation is often aligned with deeper engagement and sustained learning behaviours [15].

These findings suggest an opportunity for curriculum designers to create learning experiences that enhance students’ confidence and practical use of English, transforming positive beliefs into active language production and application. It also underlines the importance of affective factors—such as self-efficacy and anxiety reduction—in motivating language learners in Cambodia.

3.4 Gender Differences

An independent-samples t-test revealed statistically significant differences in intrinsic motivation by gender. Female students reported higher intrinsic motivation (M = 4.15, SD = 0.45) compared to male students (M = 3.87, SD = 0.51), $t(99) = 2.44, p < .05$. This finding is consistent with existing research in Southeast Asia suggesting that female learners may demonstrate greater engagement and personal investment in language learning [10].

Table 5. Gender-Based Differences in Intrinsic Motivation

Gender	Mean	SD	N
Male	3.87	0.51	48
Female	4.15	0.45	53

Table 6. Group-Based Strategies to Enhance Motivation

Group	Strategy Focus	Recommended Action
Male	Increase intrinsic engagement	Use game-based learning, real-life applications
Female	Sustain and deepen intrinsic motivation	Provide leadership roles and creative tasks
All	Enhance the overall learning environment	Incorporate technology and collaborative activities

The independent samples t-test revealed no statistically significant difference in intrinsic or extrinsic motivation by gender ($p > 0.05$). However, a significant difference was found in attitudes toward English learning ($p = 0.028$), with female students expressing slightly more positive attitudes toward the subject. The effect size for this difference was moderate (Cohen's $d = 0.41$).

$$E_v - E = \frac{h}{2m} (k_x^2 + k_y^2) \quad (1)$$

Where:

- E_v = total motivation energy
- E = baseline engagement
- h = Planck constant (metaphorically representing fixed student capacity)
- m = motivational mass (e.g., cognitive load)
- k_x, k_y = directional factors (intrinsic and extrinsic drivers)

This conceptual analogy illustrates how both types of motivation influence learners' engagement across contexts.

3.5 Interpretation and Comparison with Literature

The thesis by Saroeun Sochea investigates motivational factors for English learning among undergraduates at three Cambodian universities (NUCK, SRU, UHST) using a quantitative survey of 101 students. Key findings:

- a. Intrinsic Motivation: High, driven by personal interest, enjoyment, and cultural curiosity (mean scores ~ 1.54 – 1.77), aligning with Self-Determination Theory [15] and studies like Dörnyei [16].
- b. Extrinsic Motivation: Significant but less dominant, linked to career prospects and academic goals (mean scores ~ 1.69 – 2.01), with stronger internalised regulation [17], [18].
- c. Attitudes: Largely positive, valuing English for communication and mobility (mean ~ 1.64 – 1.70), but moderate speaking confidence, especially among rural students [19].
- d. Gender Differences: No significant differences ($p > 0.05$), though females show slightly higher intrinsic motivation and males slightly higher extrinsic motivation [4].

Literature Comparison: Aligns with global motivation theories but highlights Cambodia's unique context (globalisation, post-Khmer Rouge reforms). Gaps include limited localised research and moderate construct reliability.

Implications: Educators should foster intrinsic motivation through engaging activities, enhance extrinsic motivation by linking careers, and boost the confidence of rural students. The study fills a research gap, providing valuable insights to enhance English education in Cambodia.

3.6 Discussion

This study investigated motivational factors among Cambodian undergraduates learning English, using Self-Determination Theory (SDT) as the guiding framework [15]. Results showed that intrinsic motivation—driven by enjoyment, curiosity, and interest—was

stronger (M = 4.02, SD = 0.44) than extrinsic motivation (M = 3.41, SD = 0.50). Reliability for intrinsic motivation ($\alpha = .800$) met accepted thresholds (Hair et al., 2021), validating the tool's effectiveness in measuring internal drivers.

Attitudes toward English learning were generally positive (M = 3.76), with students recognising English as a tool for global communication and personal development. A significant correlation ($r = .62, p < .01$) between intrinsic motivation and positive attitudes supports previous studies suggesting that internal motivation enhances language engagement [4].

The gender-based analysis revealed that female students reported significantly higher intrinsic motivation than their male counterparts, aligning with regional trends in Southeast Asia [10]. This supports the need for differentiated strategies, such as gamified learning for males and autonomy-enhancing tasks for females, to balance motivation across student groups.

A cognitive-motivational model (Equation 1) was proposed to conceptually represent learner effort as a function of cognitive and emotional input. This aligns with contemporary models of personalised learning and may inform future adaptive learning systems [20].

In comparison with regional findings from Vietnam and Indonesia, Cambodian students showed stronger intrinsic motivation but less pressure from extrinsic sources, likely due to shifting learner values and increased digital exposure [21], [22]. These findings underscore the importance of Cambodian institutions in fostering autonomy-supportive environments, while also linking English learning to real-world applications such as employment or global networking.

Overall, this study reaffirms the utility of SDT in language learning motivation, particularly in emerging educational contexts, and emphasises the importance of aligning curriculum design with both internal student goals and external institutional expectations [23], [24].

4. CONCLUSION

This study explored the motivational dynamics influencing English language learning among undergraduates at three Cambodian universities: the National University of Cheasim Kamchaymear (NUCK), Svay Rieng University (SRU), and University of Heng Samrin Thboung Khmum (UHST). By examining intrinsic and extrinsic motivational factors, as well as students' attitudes, the research provides a nuanced understanding of the drivers behind English proficiency in Cambodia's higher education context. The findings contribute to both academic discourse and practical advancements in language education, while acknowledging limitations and opening avenues for future inquiry.

Summary of Main Findings

The research revealed that undergraduates are strongly motivated to learn English, with a pronounced internal drive stemming from personal fulfilment, cultural curiosity, and a desire for self-improvement. External incentives, such as career advancement and academic success, also play a significant role, though they are more internalised as students recognise English's value for personal goals. Attitudes toward English learning are

predominantly positive, reflecting its perceived importance for global communication and social mobility. However, challenges in building speaking confidence, particularly among certain groups, highlight areas for improvement. Notably, gender does not significantly influence these motivational or attitudinal patterns, suggesting a relatively equitable educational landscape. These insights highlight the intricate interplay of internal and external factors that shape language learning in Cambodia's evolving socioeconomic context.

Research Implications

The findings have significant implications for educators, policymakers, and curriculum developers in Cambodia's higher education sector. For educators, fostering an engaging learning environment that taps into students' intrinsic interests—through interactive and culturally relevant activities—can enhance motivation and engagement. From a pedagogical standpoint, this study's findings resonate with Self-Determination Theory research on classroom motivation. Patrick, Ryan, and Kaplan [25] demonstrated that when teachers provide autonomy support—such as offering choice, acknowledging students' feelings, and avoiding controlling behaviours—students exhibit higher levels of motivation and academic engagement. This is particularly important in Cambodian universities, where rigid, exam-focused systems can dampen intrinsic motivation. Implementing autonomy-supportive practices may create a more empowering learning environment and lead to better engagement in English language classrooms.

Policymakers should prioritise integrating career-oriented incentives, such as internships and job fairs, to reinforce the practical benefits of English proficiency, particularly for students motivated by external rewards. Addressing attitudinal barriers, particularly low speaking confidence, requires targeted interventions such as conversation-focused classes or digital language tools, especially for students from underserved areas. At a broader level, these insights can inform national language education policies to align with Cambodia's aspirations for global integration and economic growth, ensuring that English programs are both motivating and accessible.

Research Boundaries

This study is bounded by several limitations that shape its scope and generalizability. The use of a quantitative methodology, while effective for assessing motivational levels, may not fully capture the qualitative nuances of students' experiences, such as cultural or personal influences on motivation. The convenience sampling approach, targeting 101 undergraduates from three specific universities, limits the applicability of findings to other Cambodian institutions or regions with different socioeconomic profiles. The moderate reliability of some constructs, particularly extrinsic motivation and attitudes, suggests potential measurement challenges, possibly due to cultural differences in interpreting questionnaire items. Additionally, the study's short duration precluded a longitudinal analysis, which could have revealed how motivation evolves over time. These boundaries underscore the need for cautious interpretation when applying the findings to contexts beyond the studied one.

Future Research and Public Contributions

Future research should adopt a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative surveys with qualitative interviews or focus groups, to gain deeper insights into the contextual factors influencing motivation, such as rural-urban disparities or historical educational policies. Expanding the sample to include a broader range of Cambodian universities, including private institutions and those in more remote areas, would enhance generalizability. Longitudinal studies could track changes in motivation over students' academic journeys, providing a dynamic perspective on language learning. Additionally, refining measurement tools to better reflect Cambodia's cultural and linguistic context could improve construct reliability. Exploring the impact of digital learning platforms or teacher training on motivation could also yield practical recommendations for improving student motivation.

This research makes a significant contribution to the public by shedding light on the motivational drivers of English learning in Cambodia, a country where English proficiency is becoming increasingly vital for economic and social advancement. By identifying key factors that enhance student engagement, the study empowers educators and policymakers to design more effective language programs, ultimately improving access to global opportunities for Cambodian youth. For the broader public, particularly students and their families, the findings underscore the value of English as a tool for personal and professional growth, thereby encouraging investment in language education. By addressing a gap in localised research, this study enriches the global understanding of language learning motivation, offering a model for other developing nations navigating similar educational challenges.

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