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Teacher Discourse as Motivational Architecture: How ESL Classroom Interaction Shapes Learner Autonomy, Competence, and Relatedness

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ABSTRACT

While motivation and engagement are recognised as crucial factors in second language classrooms, the specific mechanisms by which classroom discourse mediates the link between instructional practices, motivation and engagement remain under-explored. This study examined the role of ESL teacher discourse as a motivational context. Grounded in Self-Determination Theory and Self-System Model of Motivational Development, the research investigated how teacher discourse practices shape learners' motivational experiences of autonomy, competence, and relatedness during classroom interaction. Data was collected through classroom observation and teacher interviews, and analysed through a combination of discourse analysis of teacher-student interaction and thematic analysis of interview data. The findings reveal that the use of open questioning, choice, and personal relevance were more effective in supporting learner autonomy. Learner competence was enhanced through explicit goal setting strategies, structured guidance, affective feedback, and normalisation of error. Affective feedback and normalisation of error were also effective in supporting learners' emotional and relatedness feelings, showing how motivational support is provided at both cognitive and affective levels of discourse. However, the study also discovered underlying tensions between teachers' autonomy practices and controlling discourse, which were intensified by institutional pressures related to exams. These pressures conduced towards exam-oriented, performance-based teaching practices which constrained learners' motivational experiences. Based on these findings, the study suggests implications for teacher development programmes, where reflective classroom discourse analysis raises interactional awareness regarding the motivational implications of teacher discourse practices in everyday classroom interaction.

Keywords: teacher discourse, motivation, autonomy, competence, relatedness, self-determination, engagement

INTRODUCTION

Motivation and engagement have already been identified as key contributors to successful language learning (Mercer & Dörnyei, 2020). They are firmly associated with student participation and academic achievement, especially in second language learning contexts where student-teacher interaction constitutes the principal medium of learning (Martin, 2022; reeve, 2012). In these contexts, interaction does not only provide a gateway to linguistic input, but also mediates the discourse through which motivation and engagement are continuously constructed and reconstructed (Bashir *et al.*, 2023; Cazden, 2001). As a result, classroom discourse is not recognised as merely an instructional or pedagogical instrument, but also an interactive motivational resource via which learning opportunities and learner participation can be enhanced or restricted (Walsh, 2002, 2006, 2011; Wei *et al.*, 2022).

Research in the field of motivation has been firmly influenced by Self-Determination Theory, which proposes that learners' self-motivation and engagement are based on the satisfaction of innate psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness, as well as the conditions that promote these positive processes (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Deci & Ryan, 2000, 2017). In classroom contexts, however, these motivational tendencies do not operate in isolation, but are susceptible to contextual tendencies, such as teacher-student interaction, that may either support or constrain them (Guay, 2022). The Self-System Model of Motivational Development (Dincer *et al.,* 2019; Skinner *et al.*, 2008; Skinner *et al.,* 2009; Skinner & Pitzer, 2012) propose a causal framework which connects engagement to contextual variables, particularly teachers' instructional behaviour, which affect learners' self-perceptions. These self-perceptions in turn influence learners' observable engagement behaviours. More specifically, the more teacher behaviours and interactional dynamics enhance learners' needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness, the more willing learners are to actively engage in learning activities. In this framework, motivation and engagement are not perceived as static learner attributes, but contingent outcomes of need-supportive or need-thwarting classroom discourse.

Research also offers comprehensive insights into the interactional architecture of classroom discourse (Walsh, 2011; Seedhouse, 2004). Detailed examinations have revealed how interactants co-construct discourse, and how discourse features such as questioning patterns, feedback, repair strategies, and scaffolding techniques open or close down interactional space and learner participation. However, such studies have only begun to integrate motivational theory, and hardly investigate the causal relations between specific discourse features and learners' basic psychological needs. As such, this leaves a theoretical as well as an empirical gap in which motivational studies often overlook the significance of micro-interactional details, with discourse analysis rarely addressing the motivational significance of classroom discourse.

This gap is more prominent in Global South ESL contexts, including The Gambia, where institutional imperatives, exam-oriented approaches, and large class sizes constrain the practice of autonomy-supportive teaching. Teacher discourse is still a very important source of influence on students' motivational feelings, making it even more intricate. In an environment where teachers require adherence to formal speech and academic requirements, instructional styles and conduct of ESL teachers can be seen to have actual teaching and psychological implications on students. This particular area points out the necessity of very detailed and context-specific research that examines the methods through which teacher talk influences or restricts students' needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness within microsocial situations.

The proposed study aims to bridge that gap by considering teacher discourse as a tool for a motivational system, i.e., a combination of communication methods and interactional features that actively construct a motivational context and encourage students to respond to challenges and increase their confidence. Using a combination of Self-Determination Theory (SDT) and the SSMMD approach and supplementing it with a thematic analysis of teacher interviews following the classroom observations, this study examines how Gambian ESL teacher talk has a motivational influence on students' actual needs for authentic engagement and the way that actual engagement is expressed through students' observable conduct.

By focusing on how motivational conditions are interactively constructed, this research demonstrates the importance of an integrated perception of motivation and discourse in ESL classrooms. The study illustrates how learners' motivational experiences are not just outcomes of general teaching approaches, but are constructed through specific features of discourse and interactional dynamics, providing theoretical implications and actionable insight for ESL teaching and learning. Accordingly, the following research questions were posed and investigated to address this research gap.

1. How do ESL teacher discourse strategies establish motivational conditions that influence learner autonomy, competence and relatedness in class conditions?
2. In what ways are tensions between teachers' guidance and controlling practices manifested in ESL classrooms, and how do these tensions affect learners' motivational experiences?
3. How do teachers' discourse practices line up with or deviate from their articulated intentions and beliefs in providing motivational support?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Available research on the study of second-language classrooms indicates that teacher discourse has a decisive effect on the structure of interaction, regulation of participation, and provision of learning opportunities to students. Classroom talk is not a neutral channel of delivery, but rather a kind of social activity that places learners, distributes power, and establishes the kinds of acceptable action (Fairclough, 1995; Walsh, 2006). Simultaneously, studies on learner motivation and engagement have provided insights into the psychological conditions that support continuous effort, perseverance, and meaningful engagement in learning processes, especially in the classroom (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Skinner & Pitzer, 2012). However, these complementary streams of investigation have historically developed on parallel paths with discourse mainly studied as an interactional form, and learner motivation conceptualised as an internal variable or product.

The current article attempts to develop a unified discourse between these areas of literature by theorising teacher discourse with respect to a form of motivational architecture in which experiences of learner autonomy, competence, and engagement are interactively produced. Based on Self-Determination Theory, motivation is viewed as a contextually mediated construct, and not an intrinsically fixed property where autonomy, competence and relatedness are motivational needs that are facilitated or discouraged through classroom interplay (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Engagement is therefore discussed as the visible manifestation of motivational processes in the case of classroom activities demonstrated by learner participation, initiative, and continued involvement (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004; Reeve, 2012). The present review is thus biased towards empirical studies that can shed light on the effects of specific discourse practices, including questioning, feedback, turn assignment, and task framing, on motivational affordances in ESL classrooms. First, the review examines teacher talk in L2 settings before incorporating perspectives on motivation and engagement to formulate the conceptual frame on which the analysis would be grounded.

Defining Teacher Discourse Patterns

Discourse has been described generally as language use as a type of social practice (Fairclough, 1992). In the context of education, the meaning of discourse is sometimes narrowed to different forms of spoken interaction between teachers and students and among students themselves within the classroom (Jocuns, 2012; Thoms, 2012). Although discourse is used in different social contexts, the classroom offers a prime example of its constitutive power. Within this context, discourse is viewed as a dynamic process of student-teacher interaction and co-construction of meaning during which students' understanding, motivation and engagement are continuously shaped and reshaped (Bashir et al., 2023; Cazden, 2001). Regulated by established communication patterns and norms, such as questioning patterns, feedback norms, and scaffolding techniques, classroom discourse is not merely the transference of knowledge. Instead, as a pedagogical instrument, its analytical significance lies in its ability to shape power differentials within the classroom, learners' motivational experiences, and their participation and engagement behaviours.

According to Walsh (2011), classroom discourse refers to a "series of complex and interrelated micro-contexts (modes), where meanings are co-constructed by teachers and learners and where learning occurs in the ensuing talk" (p. 110). In contrast, Cazden (2001) considers classroom discourse as a communication system set up by teachers to facilitate learners' access to and reflection on new knowledge. Despite their differences in focus, both of the above definitions centralise the teacher's role in guiding discourse. This centrality underlines the fact that learning within the classroom does not occur merely by the existence of a curriculum and of interaction alone, but more importantly, by the mechanisms through which teachers establish, control, and open up interactional space. From a SDT point of view, the extent to which these mechanisms support or restrict students' needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness will have a direct impact on the quality of their engagement (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Guay, 2022).

Teacher discourse may therefore be defined not just as a subset of classroom discourse but an essential, teacher-centred activity that influences how learning occurs. It may be conceptualised as the component of classroom discourse that focuses on the teacher's use of language and communication strategies during instruction (Walsh, 2006). More specifically, teacher discourse can be described as "the myriad ways in which educators communicate with students, including, but not limited to, verbal exchanges, gestures, and written communication" (Bashir *et al.*, 2023, p. 158). This indicates that teacher discourse is both strategic and multidimensional, comprising communication patterns and discourse choices that convey knowledge and influence motivation and engagement simultaneously.

In ESL classrooms, teachers function as facilitators by initiating interactive exchanges, and supporting learners' developmental processes (Saad, 2023). As Walsh (2011) emphasises, teachers typically hold control over topic selection and turn-management even in the most student-centred classrooms, and learner contributions are often shaped by teacher prompts. Walsh (2006) argues further that because teachers maintain control of both content and procedure, their discourse choices central to the failure or success of the lesson. From a SDT perspective, discourse choices and patterns that facilitate scaffolding and dialogic forms of interaction enhance learner autonomy, competence, and relatedness while controlling patterns undermine learner motivation and engagement (Deci & Ryan, 2000). This emphasizes the need to examine the role of teacher discourse as a motivational architecture in directing interaction and facilitating learner participation and engagement.

The Significance of Teacher Discourse Patterns in the ESL Classroom

The significance of teacher discourse in ESL classrooms is exemplified by its power to determine learners' positions as either passive recipients of teacher-approved knowledge or active participants involved in the co-construction of meaning and knowledge. As Walsh (2011) emphasises, teacher discourse has a definite impact on the amount and quality of interactional space in ESL classrooms. Additionally, teacher discourse is more central in second language classrooms where teacher talk functions both as a means of delivery and, at the same time, models input that student are expected to learn (Walsh, 2006). These observations indicate that teacher discourse patterns are not merely linguistic or pedagogical choices, but mechanisms through which teachers expand or restrict opportunities for L2 student engagement. In SDT terms, teachers' choice of discourse strategies determines the extent to which student-teacher interaction enhances students' motivational experiences and willingness to participate (Kiemer *et al.,* 2015).

Within ESL classrooms, teacher discourse patterns have been described as recurring structures of language that teachers use to organise interaction during lessons (Springer, 2004). Walsh (2006, p. 3) describes these structures as "features of classroom [communication] which are essentially the responsibility of the teacher." These features comprise communication patterns typically used by ESL teachers during classroom interaction, with the Initiation-Response-Feedback (IRF) sequence as the most common pattern (Tong *et al.*, 2024, Walsh, 2002). Research on this discourse pattern provides evidence of its motivational influence as a potentially facilitative or restrictive strategy. Some studies claim that the pattern is tight and supports short predetermined responses from learners which creates narrow interactional patterns that do not support learner participation.

For instance, recent studies indicate that the unequal relations and controlled environment reflected by tightly structured IRF exchanges reduce learner participation, agency and sense of ownership (Chen, 2022; Hidayatullah, 2024). Teacher-dominated IRF interaction weakens self-determined motivation because participation is externally-driven by teacher expectations, undermining learners' basic psychological needs (Reeve, 2012). Nonetheless, there has been evidence supported by studies that the restructuring of the IRF pattern into an interactive exchange can stimulate motivational conditions and encourage active engagement. This has been driven by open-ended questions and initiatives that shape the class into an engaging environment.

Questions represent the most frequently used means of entering into classroom discourse and exercise considerable influence upon the flow of lessons, controlling the participation of learners and evaluation of learning outcomes. Indeed, evidence shows ensuing discussions depend largely upon questioning pattern chosen by teachers. For instance, Adriatico's (2023) research on ESL students within a Philippine university showed that display questions seemed to prevent classroom participation, leading learners to provide brief, ritual answers while keeping the communication teacher-centered. On the contrary, referential, probing, and follow-up questions made way for authentic thoughts and prepared learners to provide well-constructed and elaborate answers, keeping learners engaged. Similarly, Kelly's (2007) findings reported classroom observations, noting that open-ended and dialogue-type questions contributed towards balancing the degree of learner participation, thereby reducing the existing performance gaps between underperforming and gifted students, created and widened by evaluative questioning patterns. These researchers agree with Walsh's (2006) perspective supporting the idea of enhancing learners' classroom interaction through the use of elaborated/reflection questioning.

Additionally, research suggests that allowing learners ample time to process their thoughts helps to make them more likely to participate as well as promotes higher-order thinking. Wait-time is particularly effective at a deeper level when combined with constructive feedback. The motivational impact of constructive feedback strategies on learners' self-concepts of confidence and efficacy has been highlighted by many researchers (Mahmood, 2018; Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Pehmer *et al.*, 2015). These researchers suggest constructive, process-oriented feedback strategies enhance motivation. On the other hand, corrective feedback techniques such as immediate repair have been criticised for their potential to limit learners' opportunities of developing problem-solving strategies, thereby reducing learner autonomy (Lyster & Saito, 2010).

The motivational impact of these feedback strategies is also affected by the timing of feedback delivery. Whether feedback is provided immediately or delayed after error or task, the impact of its timing on learning gains has been examined by various studies. Some have attributed advantage to immediate feedback based on its potential to offer immediate comparison between errors and feedback (Canals *et al.*, 2021; Fu & Li, 2022; Li *et al.*, 2016). However, others found no advantage for immediate feedback (Henderson, 2021; Quin, 2014; Rassaei, 2024). Furthermore, Kelly (2007) showed that students are more willing to extend their answers and engage in talk when teachers delay the evaluative move within the IRE pattern. By withholding judgment, teachers can alleviate the pressure of negative evaluation and close the window for control concerning the participant's contributions. What these seemingly contradictory findings indicate is that the motivational consequences of immediate versus delayed feedback depends on other factors such as the complexity of the task, student levels, and teachers' instructional objectives.

Student Engagement

Student engagement is generally understood as a multidimensional concept that includes behavioural participation, cognitive investment, emotional involvement and agentic participation in classroom activity (Fredricks *et al.,* 2004). Behavioural engagement counts as visible actions like participating in tasks and making effort. Cognitive engagement deals with the learning quality reached by psychological investment reflected by self-regulation, willingness to take up challenges, and apply strategic learning techniques. Emotional engagement refers to learners' affective reactions to teachers, classmates, academics, and school in response to the process and outcomes of learning activities (Fredricks et al., 2004; Appleton *et al.,* 2006). Expanding these dimensions, agentic engagement emphasises the proactive contributions of learners to instruction. These contributions include leading interactions and influencing learning activities (Reeve & Tseng, 2011; Reeve, 2012). It is important to note that engagement is not a constant learner trait but rather a context-dependent phenomenon that arises through interaction and becomes apparent in students' actions and contributions during classroom discussions (Reeve, 2012; Skinner & Pitzer, 2012).

Motivation

The concept of motivation in second language learning is increasingly redefined as a context-based phenomenon influenced by the interplay between learners and other classroom figures such as teachers, rather than a constant personal trait. This change is connected to an increased recognition that learners' willingness to work, persevere, and engage with tasks varies in accordance with teachers' instructional practices, task design, and interpersonal relations with students (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2010; Ryan & Deci, 2017). From this conceptualisation, learners do not merely bring motivation into the classroom; rather, motivation is continuously built and controlled through interactional processes within the classroom. In this regard, research focus has shifted from the broad orientations of language learning to the micro-level circumstances under which teacher discourse practices and interactional dynamics occupy a key place in determining learners' motivational experiences. This is a classroom-based view which offers a strong reason to explore how teacher discourse serves as a major contextual tool to promote or restrict motivation in daily classroom interaction.

Motivation and Engagement

Motivation and engagement are conceptually different constructs though they are closely related. Motivation refers to the internal processes that activate, guide and maintain behaviour, including goals, values and reasons for action in learners. On the other hand, engagement refers to the actual behavioural realisations of these motivational processes in the context of learning (Skinner & Pitzer, 2012; Reeve, 2012). In the classroom, motivation is still unobservable; its existence is deduced by students' activities during the learning process, such as the participatory factor, persistence and responsiveness to learning. This distinction is analytically important, since high motivation does not always lead to engagement unless classroom environments allow learners to realize their motivational orientations.

From this perspective, engagement is conceptualised as the visible component of learners' internal motivational resources, transforming their intentions into observable behaviour in particular educational situations (Skinner and Pitzer, 2012). Motivation, therefore, refers to the rationale behind learners' behaviour whereas engagement defines how this behaviour is realized in the classroom by engaging, persisting and exerting effort in learning activities (Reeve, 2012). In this sense, engagement provides a dynamic perspective of motivational processes that can be explored as they unfold in real-time classroom interaction. This motivational model of engagement is particularly useful to classroom-based inquiry, where motivation is not just an abstract construct but a context-driven behaviour contingent upon teachers' instructional as well interactional behaviour.

Research recognises the teacher as an important figure in creating and shaping learners' motivational experiences (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2010; Deci & Ryan, 2017). Beyond task design and assessment, teachers' influence on motivation includes the ordinary discourse practices through which they organise interaction, frame expectations and manage learner output. Discourse features such as questioning behaviour, feedback, wait time, and the degree of learner autonomy can either support or discourage student readiness to engage, maintain efforts and assume ownership of the learning process (Deci & Ryan, 2000). From the classroom viewpoint, motivation is not a personal trait but a dynamic product of the learning environment which develops from student-teacher interactions. In this sense, teacher discourse is one of the key motivational resources by which engagement is either promoted or restricted.

Indicators Versus Facilitators of Engagement

One of the most important distinctions in the engagement literature is the distinction between indicators of engagement and facilitators of engagement. While indicators include observable manifestations of participation, effort, persistence and on-task behaviour through which engagement is identified, facilitators refer to the contextual conditions and instructional practices that result in these manifestations (Reschly & Christenson, 2012; Skinner & Pitzer, 2012). Combining these two constructs confounds the causal implications as engagement behaviours are considered as dependent and predictor variables at the same time. From a classroom-based approach, engagement should be perceived as a product of the learning environment rather than something generated by learners themselves. The importance of such an analytical clarification is that it would shift the discussion from how much students are engaged to how engagement is created, maintained, or compromised in instructional settings.

In this context, teacher discourse practices are important facilitators of student engagement because they shape the learning environment in which engagement occurs (Reeve, 2012; Skinner & Pitzer, 2012). Instructional decisions concerning task design, feedback strategies, autonomy-promotive practices, and interactional organisation determine the opportunities available for effective learner participation and investment (Walsh, 2002, 2006). It is important to note that teacher discourse plays a significant role in mediating engagement by outlining objectives, managing turn-taking, communicating expectations and moderating learner contribution and initiatives. When learners' psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness are bolstered by teacher behaviour, engagement is more likely to be self-endorsed and sustained. This perspective offers sufficient rationale to study teacher discourse as a facilitative instrument through which motivation and engagement is constructed during interaction.

The Interplay Between Context, Self and Action

As a subset within the broader SDT framework, the Self-Systems Model of Motivational Development (SSMMD) portrays engagement as a dynamic process that results from the interplay between contextual factors, learners' self-system processes and their observable actions (Ng *et al.,* 2018; Skinner & Pitzer, 2012). Rather than a fixed condition, engagement is thus considered a process dependent on the motivational support and opportunities provided within the social context of the classroom. The action element of the model comprises the engagement behaviours that originate from the interplay between the productive capacities of the context and learners’ inner motivational processes. By making both context and self-necessary precursors to observable indicators, the model provides a complete picture of how engagement is developed and maintained during learning activities.

Context and self-systems are seen as two interconnected types of facilitators that lead and mold students’ engagement behaviours (Wong & Liem, 2021). Context comprises the external events that take place during teacher-student interactions which might either help or hinder the satisfaction of students' basic psychological needs, whereas the component of self-reveals individual learners' subjective interpretations of such experiences. Self-related processes cover not only learners' viewpoints of autonomy, competence, and relatedness, but also their linguistic self-confidence and language anxiety beliefs (Mercer, 2019). More importantly, these self-perceptions do not occur separately but are always being formed by the interaction in the learning environment. In that way, motivation is influenced by the way students perceive classroom experiences, thus placing self-system processes as the central mechanism through which contextual factors are activated.

In this mediation context, the SSMMD places student-teacher interaction as a key contextual factor for predicting motivation and engagement. According to Skinner and Pitzer (2012), there are three interactional characteristics that can be differentiated through which teachers can influence learners’ self-perceptions: pedagogical caring, optimal structure, and autonomy support. The term pedagogical caring describes teachers’ responses to the needs, feelings, and expectations of students (Ghiasvand & Sharifpour, 2024; Zhao & Li, 2012). Optimal structure includes the clarity, quality, and appropriateness of the instructional language used to support learning. Autonomy support can be delivered through instructional styles and discourse practices that allow students the expression of choice, initiative, and meaningful participation through dialogue (Jang *et al.,* 2010). These interactional dimensions are capable of demonstrating how teacher discourse functions as a motivational factor influencing learners’ self-images and learning, thereby sustaining engagement through routine classroom interaction.

The Importance of Student-Teacher Relationships

In the context second language classrooms, the importance of student-teacher relationships is emphasised because learners' success is largely dependent on interactional and relational factors (Mercer & Dörnyei, 2020). Mutual respect, care, and responsiveness are the key characteristics of good relationships, which then create the feeling among learners of being connected and accepted, thus boosting their motivation and engagement (Ryan & Deci, 2017). The more students feel that teachers are supportive and keen on their learning, the more likely learners are to take part in the process. From the angle of motivation, the relationship between students and teachers is not only a matter of bad or good conditions, but also of relational contexts that determine the nature of learners' classroom interaction and their willingness to participate in it.

The existence of emotionally supportive relationships between teachers and students is one of the main factors that contribute to the learning environment where students feel confident to participate, take risks, and make errors without being afraid of negative evaluation (Mercer, 2019; Dewaele & Li, 2020). The most significant factors that determine the way students are perceived in terms of their contributions and whether errors are treated as normal or are discouraged are teachers' feedback and their interactional responses. In cases where teacher discourse is built on trust and understanding, students are more likely to be active, to take up challenging tasks, and participate in sustained interaction. On the contrary, communication practices that are seen as dismissive or judgmental tend to raise learner anxiety and reduce participation. These interactional features are a clear indication of the importance of teacher discourse that is aimed at humanizing the learner and help in lowering the affective filter, raising their willingness for risk-taking, and facilitating true engagement.

Theoretical Framework

This research is centered around Self-Determination Theory (SDT) (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2017) and the Self-System Model of Motivational Development (SSMMD) (Dincer *et al.,* 2019; Skinner & Pitzer, 2012; Ng et al., 2018), which view motivation and engagement as mutually influencing, context-dependent processes during interactions in the classroom. This aspect of the teacher-student dynamics is further analysed through the classroom discourse analytic perspective (Walsh, 2006, 2011), looking at the way teacher talk is responsible for creating motivational conditions.

SDT suggests that meaningful engagement cannot happen unless the three psychological needs of learners: autonomy, competence, and relatedness, are met. Autonomy is when learners feel they have some control and are making worthwhile decisions; competence refers to their positive feelings about their learning and skills; and relatedness is being communicated and accepted as part of the class through the learning environment (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Although the theory does recognize the existence of these needs in learners, it still regards them as socially constructed, hence their use in classroom research dealing with instructional interaction is quite appropriate and enlightening.

SSMMD goes a step further than SDT by providing a process-based approach of how motivational support works in the classroom. From the perspective of this model, engagement is viewed as a behaviour that students show as a result of the interaction between outside factors and their psyche; eventually, the outcomes of this process feed back into the sequence with potential influence on the process (Skinner & Pitzer, 2012). Instructional practices and interpersonal interactions are key contextual factors which might either support or frustrate psychological needs of the learners and self-system processes as learners' subjective interpretations of classroom situation, such as their feelings of autonomy, competence, relatedness, and beliefs related to specific fields of study or activities, including self-efficacy, linguistic self-confidence and anxiety (Ng et al., 2018; Mercer, 2019). Thus, engagement is seen as an observable sign of motivation rather than its direct measure.

The distinction between facilitators and indicators of engagement is the main point of the SSMMD framework (Skinner & Pitzer, 2012). This distinction brings to light the causality relationship by treating engagement as a product of classroom conditions rather than an explanatory factor that has to be established. In the current research, teacher discourse is considered to be the means through which motivational support for engagement is provided.

To investigate the construction of motivational contexts in real-time classroom setting, the study adopts a discourse analysis viewpoint according to Walsh (2006, 2011). This approach views classroom interactions as a major site where teachers' interactional decisions and communicative practices are negotiated in relation to opportunities for learner participation and learning objectives. Through these interactive strategies, teacher discourse influences learner agency, competence and relational experiences, which in turn affect their observable engagement behaviours.

On one hand, SDT and SSMMD together give the theoretical basis for comprehending motivation and engagement; on the other hand, classroom discourse analysis provides the tools for the analysis of how motivational experiences are shaped by each moment of teaching interaction. The combination of these two methods allows the research to view teacher talk as a motivational architecture, a living system of interactional practices that controls the students' motivational experiences and affects their participation in ESL classroom interaction.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The study employs a qualitative classroom-oriented research approach to investigate the role of teacher discourse as a motivational architecture in the ESL classroom. Grounded by Self-Determination Theory and the Self-System Model of Motivational Development as the guiding theoretical frameworks, the study focuses on normal classroom interaction which is viewed as a primary location where motivational practices and learner engagement are enacted. Discourse analysis was employed to examine how teacher discourse practices create opportunities for learner autonomy, competence, and engagement.

Research Context and Participants

The data was collected in ten ESL classes conducted at Gambia College School of Education. The study included six ESL teachers, Mati, Bayo, Lama, Rama, Sagarr, and Saja, whose classes were observed during everyday teaching sessions. The selection of these tutors was conducted through purposive sampling on account of their teaching experience matching the theme of the study. In their role as ESL tutors, their discourse practices not only entail instructional instruments, but also provide linguistic input and create motivational learning environments. The data was collected through audio-recordings during observations with the aim of obtaining precise data on teacher-student interactions. Interviews with the tutors followed observations with the objective of investigating their perceptions on their classroom practices. These data collection methods allowed triangulation on teachers' discourse practices and intentions.

Data Collection

Direct classroom observation of each participant tutor was carried out. The audio captured participants' interactional exchanges while field notes described how lessons unfolded, interactional dynamics, and notable moments in interaction. Immediately after each class, teacher interviews were carried out and recorded. Most of the questions sought to probe into teachers' instructional aims, how they envisioned motivation and engagement, and the rationale behind specific discourse practices observed in the lessons. Classroom recordings were verbatim transcribed, paying particular attention to interactional patterns that highlighted teacher communicative choices and learner responses. Similarly, interview conversations were also fully transcribed. For confidentiality reasons, every transcript was anonymized. Treating classroom observations and teacher interviews as complementary datasets contextualised the analysis of classroom discourse in light of teachers' stated beliefs and intentions.

Operationalising Motivational Support in Discourse

Motivational support was analysed through discourse practices related to learners' basic psychological needs. Autonomy support was recognized by teacher talk that invited learner choice, acknowledged student perspectives, or provided support and encouragement for student-led contributions. Competence support was explored through feedback, scaffolding, task framing, and teaching practices that illuminated learners' perception of effectiveness. Relatedness support was examined through discourse practices that communicated care, respect, encouragement, and responsiveness, thus helping to build a sense of emotional safety.

Student Engagement as an Analytic Product

Student engagement was analysed as the active element of the motivational process and was assessed by means of the four indicators: behavioural, cognitive, emotional, and agentic. Behavioural engagement was characterized by participation, persistence, and on-task behaviour; cognitive engagement by the application of significant effort and responses showing strategic thinking; emotional engagement by the display of emotions and the readiness to participate; and agentic engagement by students taking turns, asking questions, and making efforts to direct classroom activity. These indicators were treated as the products of discourse-mediated motivational support rather than the variables that explain motivation. In other words, because the study focuses on the effect of teacher discourse patterns on learners' BSNs, engagement-indicative behaviours were treated as evidence of the effects of teachers' motivational practices on learners' psychological needs rather than the subject of independent analysis.

Linking Discourse and Teacher Intentions and Beliefs

Thematic analysis (Braun & Clark, 2006, 2013) was conducted on the interview data in order to situate the findings of the classroom discourse analysis. Taking the teachers' expressed intentions against their discourse practices allowed the analysis to recognize points of convergence and conflict between intended motivational support and the reality of interaction, thereby fortifying the validity of interpretations within the study. The additional use of interview data facilitated methodological triangulation, which connected teachers' pedagogical beliefs, their self-reported motivation and instructional objectives with their actual interactional practices. Exploring teachers' rationalisations of their classroom practices facilitated the contextualisation of prevailing discourse patterns instead of relying solely on text-based analysis of discourse.

Findings

This section contains the results of the classroom discourse analysis that focused on investigating how teacher talk serves as a motivational instrument for students' experiences of autonomy, competence, and relatedness. The analysis was based on classroom interaction data gathered from ten ESL lessons, and supported by thematic analysis of post-observation teacher interviews. Arranged around specific themes, the analysis reflects key discourse patterns by which motivation was either supported or thwarted as well as teachers' rationalisations regarding their practices. Classroom excerpts were used as evidence of teachers' motivational practices, while interview data was brought in to contextualise motivational practices and examine the correspondence or divergence between teacher intentions and interactional performance, thereby enhancing analytical validity.

Activating Student Voice Through Open Questioning

The analysis indicated that open-ended questioning constituted a key component of the autonomy-supportive strategies employed by participating tutors. As the following excerpt indicates, open questioning strategies were used to support independent learner thinking, self-expression, and interpretational skills.

Extract 1

T: Can you tell us something that you learned from the story? (4) yes group members or anyone?

L: don't marry someone because of she is beautiful but the attitude

T: That is a good lesson Ousman…Okay who else want to say something? What did you learn from the story? (5) Let's discuss.

L: what I learn from the story is whenever you are marrying someone, don't look at the person's beauty or status (3) maybe the person is rich yes that is status because that one, whatever it takes long, it will finish and the attitude will remain there forever (Mati)

In this extract, Fafa's use of open invitations in lines 1-2 and 4-5 can be understood as a discourse strategy that signals the acceptance of multiple perspectives, thereby encouraging students to articulate their personal viewpoints. This open questioning enhances autonomy as it empowers learners to choose and articulate their own moral interpretations of the story. As Bashir *et al.*, (2023) indicate, open invitations are effective in promoting active learner participation and agency. Similarly, the feedback moves in line 4 endorsing the learner response in the previous line signals that self-determined contributions was rewarded. By coupling positive feedback with more open invitations as follow-up moves, Fafa widened the interactional space further, reinforcing other learners' motivation to articulate their own interpretations. The autonomy-supportive value of these discourse moves is evidenced largely by the extended learner response from lines 6-9 which reflects increased volition and interpretive skill. Additionally, the moves suggest Fafa's endorsement of learner perspectives, a prominent feature of autonomy-supportive teaching that amplifies learner voice and participation (Reeve & Cheon, 2021). By coupling open invitations with affirmative feedback and explorative prompts, Fafa's discourse established a learner-centred environment where student voices were prominent.

When asked about her questioning practices during the interview, Fafa's narrative revealed a meaningful alignment between her beliefs about questioning techniques and her actual classroom practice.

I think the matter of which type of questions to use is decided by what the teacher wants to achieve. For instance, I use display questions mostly when I want to highlight certain things like grammatical rules and move on to something else. But I prefer to use open questions if I want to widen the discussion and encourage them to voice out their ideas and justify their opinions, like I was doing today. (Mati)

Fafa's response above clearly indicates her belief that open questioning is more suitable to encourage learners to articulate personal opinions and apply critical, independent thinking. A key phrase in her narrative *'the matter of which type of questions to use is decided by what the teacher wants to achieve'* is particularly interesting. It explicitly indicates her endorsement of Walsh's (2002) suggestion that EFL instructors' interactional decisions should be aligned with the pedagogical objectives of the moment. The connection she draws between open questions and "*encouraging* [students] *to voice out their idea and justify their opinions*" directly reflects her questioning techniques aimed at developing learners' interpretive skills. As suggested by Gayoung and Sun-Young (2024), open referential questioning is an effective strategy to stimulate deeper thinking and exploration. Therefore, Fafa's interview claims reveal some coherence in her autonomy support where the complementary relationship between her beliefs and actual teaching practices is likely to strengthen learners' volition and experience of meaningful engagement.

Apart from interpretive voice, the classroom data revealed a different pathway by which questioning strategies supported learner autonomy. The following extract demonstrates how open questioning can prompt learners to reflective self-appraisal and personalised reasoning.

Extract 2

T: not me, you… you said most teachers… So, we are now personalizing it… why would you avoid teaching some grammar topics?

L3: for me there was a particular area which was very complicated for me… I asked my mentor but she said we should do tenses and I was supposed to start teaching it because she wasn't around … I postponed it and prepared when I got home and came the following day

T: Okay there are certain areas that you may ask me in which I have limitations. But again too, the question I wanted to ask based on what you said is it possible for you to sit at a corner or in a library and read about tenses and be able to teach them?

L3: yes, it is possible but then … for example, for introduction, you can do that but to go in detail to just sit in one particular place for just for 30 minutes or less than that I wouldn't be able to do that. (Lama)

Lama's first autonomy-supportive strategy in the extract is demonstrated by his insistence that the learner is the centre of interaction instead of the teacher (10). By removing himself from authority, he positions the learner's personal and professional experiences as the centre of discourse, validating the learner's motives and challenges as relevant sources of knowledge. Thus, the questioning strategy promotes student voice not by eliciting responses based on lesson content, but by encouraging learners to articulate self-reflection and assessment. The reflective question in line 11 encouraged the learner to articulate her personal beliefs, challenges, and professional judgement. As described by self-determination researchers (Deci & Ryan, 2000), why-questions support student autonomy and agency by inviting them to articulate the rationale behind their thinking. Equally effective in supporting learner autonomy, the follow-up question in lines 17-19 pushed the learner to extend her previous answer by assessing her own resourcefulness. As indicated by Alexander (2020), such dialogic questioning empowers students to discuss, reason and evaluate, thereby building autonomous learning strategies.

This autonomy-supportive practice aligns closely with the tutor's interview claims that higher-order questioning encourages learners to articulate their own views.

I use open-ended questions to introduce a new concept to create opportunities for students to express their thoughts. But after they understand the concept, I probe them with more demanding questions for them to justify their answers. Sometimes this gives them problems but that is why I apply these questions after they have some understanding of the topic so they can express what they know and evaluate themselves. (Lama)

It seems obvious that this response reflects the Lama's interactional practices in Extract 2. His statement that he applies open-ended questions "*to create opportunities for learners to express their thoughts*" corresponds with how his questioning highlights learners' perspectives and promotes their sense of ownership of the learning process. The claim that he probes learners with "*more demanding questions*" that encourage justification after learners understand a concept is also corroborated by his discourse behaviour. After the learner expressed her challenges in teaching certain areas in grammar, Lama uses a probe to push her to evaluate her own reasoning. This pattern of questioning leads to a gradual increase in cognitive load that supports learner autonomy by shifting from lower- to higher-order thinking (Uştuk & Hu, 2025).

Enhancing Task Ownership Through Choice and Personal Relevance

The provision of choice and personal relevance in learning activities were also highlighted as key autonomy-supportive strategies to promote learner agency and sense of ownership of learning activities during several lessons. This is illustrated in the following extracts in which both choice and relevance were provided simultaneously.

Extract 3

T: So, I will give one more example here … and then I want you to write either three examples of adverbs modifying verbs … or three examples of adverbs modifying adjectives … or three examples of adverbs modifying other adverbs … okay?

LL: /yes/yes/

T: You must derive your sentences from things that you do yourself maybe on a daily basis.

L: oh… can we work we work together to do that?

T: okay the three of you can work together (Rama)

Extract 4

T: So those here picks a sound, describe it for us based on the chart you are looking at. Start

L: hey! My heart is jumping

T: You will choose any sound you want to from the chart, articulate the sound first then you describe it

L1: **(comes to the board)** Sorry Sir describe in what sense? **(laughter)**

L2: description of vowels

T: describe the sound by telling us its phonetic characteristics. This is useful because it helps you improve your pronunciation (Lama)

In both excerpts, autonomy support was provided by framing task environments that enhance learners' experience of ownership, agency and volitional engagement. In Rama's case, these strategies include the implied modelling (23), the explicit delivery of clear instructions to provide structure intended to scaffold learner preparedness for and accomplishment of the task, the provision of choice (23-25), personal relevance framing (28), and recognising learner perspectives (31). In addition to the provision of choice (32), Lama's autonomy-oriented practices also include the provision of task rationale (39-40). Therefore, while Excerpt 3 highlights choice and relevance in task ownership, Extract 4 extends ownership by foregrounding the provision of explanatory rationale in task management. In Extract 3, Rama's combination of both autonomy and structure aligns with a key observation by engagement researchers that autonomy-supportive strategies foster deeper self-endorsed motivation when they are employed with structural support (Fierro-Suero *et al.*, 2024). Additionally, the relevance framing provided by both tutors connect with the argument that choice alone does not necessarily increase learner autonomy if learners do not realize the relevance of the activity to their personal needs (Vo, 2023). By combining both choice and relevance in a task, teachers are more likely to generate more effort and deeper engagement in learners (Assor *et al.,* 2002:).

However, the tutors' responses during the interview reveal an interesting interplay between their autonomy beliefs and enacted practices.

For me, I think autonomy is based on choice, giving them the choice, but of course, with limitation. I do not give them an open choice. There was a limitation with regards to the freedom that they have to choose. (Rama)

I think the most effective is choice. Providing choices for learners, not just using one way that this is the way we should do it. So when a teacher or a lecturer is so flexible by giving learners different or multiple choices… That's one way. The other way is you can even be asking them, who would want to volunteer to come and do this? (Lama)

In these comments, both tutors articulate a similar belief that autonomy is triggered best by providing meaningful choice. However, the degree of choice varies according to the comments. Rama's emphasis on providing *"choice, but of course, with limitations"* demonstrates her cognizance that choice needs to be balanced with structure. This is supported by Cloak *et al.* (2023) who emphasise that balancing choice with structure creates a challenging and need-satisfying environment. On the other hand, Lama's emphasis on teacher flexibility, learner self-selection and voluntary participation as key components of autonomy-supportive environments suggests his commitment to non-controlling strategies that allow learners the agency to determine their own path to learning. This aligns with the SDT view that voluntary participation promotes more internalised forms of motivation by creating a higher sense of ownership and control (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Therefore, it seems that the tutors' orientations regarding the provision of choice is supported by their discourse practices. However, their narratives appear to downplay the significance of framing tasks with personal relevance, despite its observable presence in their discourse practices. This narrow conceptualisation of autonomy support on the basis of choice alone may suggest that their stated beliefs do not correspond fully with their discourse practices; or that their autonomy practices correspond with a more integrated and dynamic conception of autonomy support than they are able to articulate. For the latter case, a potential implication could be an inconsistent autonomy practice across different lessons, possibly resulting in unequal distribution of autonomy support and potential conflicts between autonomy support and control.

Structured Guidance Through Explicit Goal Setting

The interaction data also reveal evidence of how teacher discourse strategies enhanced learner competence and self-efficacy beliefs through explicit communication of learning objectives, task expectations and success conditions. In SDT perspective, structured learning environments promote learner confidence and encourage engagement. The extracts below are jointly analysed to foreground these recurring strategies through which the tutors enacted competence support.

Extract 5

T: So last class we were dealing with the 24 consonants that we were describing? So today we are moving on to vowel sounds, okay? and by the end of our session today, you should be able to recognize vowel sounds, although by now you should be already. And then two, you should be able to describe vowel sounds in terms of what? shape of the mouth, whether the mouth is open, half open, or closed…and then the position of the tongue when the sound is made…. (Lama)

Extract 6

T: Okay so class today aah we are going to look at tenses, okay? But I always tell you, you are not only after content, you are after content as well as the pedagogy. That is how to teach this topic. So we will first look at the objectives you need to have for the lesson, okay? Then we will discuss the teaching and learning aids you require… the teaching and learning activities you need to do … and then the form of assessment you need to carry out… so the lesson is now complete…are you with me? (Sagarr)

In both excerpts, teacher talk focuses on establishing an organised discourse with a clear sense of direction by communicating well-structured lesson objectives, indicating clear expectations, and modelling success. In Extract 5, by explicitly linking the current lesson to the previous one (41-42), Lama triggers learners' previous knowledge which could be used to establish continuity and promote mastery. This linking strategy also allows learners to establish the connection between different components of the broader field of phonetics, which enhances coherence, clarity and transfer of learning (Mayer, 2004). Coupled with structured goal setting (43-44) and chunking strategy (44-47), which breaks the main lesson goal into smaller, more easily achievable outcomes (Mercer & Dörnyei, 2020), these moves support competence by orienting learner efforts and enhancing their ability to monitor their own progress. While Extract 6 focuses on explicit content-specific objectives, Extract 7 extends the instructional focus beyond knowing to include the process of teaching. Covering more diverse fields, the outlined objectives (49-53) involve higher cognitive processing skills, which enhance competence at a more advanced professional level. Thus, Sagarr's lesson frame suggests his awareness that his instructional objectives extend beyond the mere transmission of content and includes professional development of learners.

The tutors' responses during the interview indicate the alignment between their practices and their pedagogical intentions to strengthen learner competence through structure and clarity. As Lama explained, *"it was important for them to see that today's lesson was just a continuation of the previous lesson… so they can link their knowledge."* Directly reflected in his lesson frame in extract 5 above, encouraging students to use previous knowledge to process new information promotes learner competence by developing their deep learning strategies (Green, 2015). Additionally, his explanation that stating the learning objectives clearly helps students *"evaluate themselves as the lesson progresses"* indicates the rationale behind his goal-setting strategy. As confirmed by Wang *et al.* (2024), the provision of structured lesson objectives improves learners' self-regulation and evaluation strategies.

On the other hand, Sagarr explained that for teacher-trainees "*no matter how well you know the content, I mean, if you don't know the pedagogy aspect, it will be* *difficult."* This clearly indicates his belief that content knowledge alone is not sufficient without the appropriate pedagogical practices to deliver it. This highlights his concern for the professional development of learners and mirrors his interactional focus on both content and pedagogical framing. His clarification that *"deliberately I put the pedagogic aspect because these are teachers"* and fear of producing *"qualified teachers who would not replicate their qualification"* are also consistent with his goal-setting strategy with an embedded modelling of the sequential progression of lesson stages. Therefore, both teachers' responses framed the setting of clear objectives as central to promoting learner competence, although with slightly different emphases. While Lama linked structure with learners' abilities for self-regulation and mastery, Sagarr extended its significance to professional competence.

Normalising Errors and Supporting Competence Through Affective Feedback

The following two excerpts demonstrate how teachers' feedback strategies enhanced learner competence by normalising mistakes and lowering the emotional cost of participation. While both excerpts illustrate how tolerant feedback can encourage learner participation, feedback is delivered in interactionally different ways. Whereas Extract 7 enhances competence by framing errors as essential parts of the learning process, Extract 8 extends the feedback, explicitly addressing learners' affective weaknesses and face protection. Considered together, the excerpts reveal that competence-oriented feedback operates not only on the instructional level, but also on the interpersonal level, reducing learner anxiety and increasing their willingness to make attempts.

Extract 7

T: We are saying car, large, march. How does the vowel sound in these words look like

L: uhm… I…I… cannot describe it, sir.

T: Look… no worries you can try, mess up then we will guide you

L: it's just like letter 'a' with some dots like a colon

T: you know there is a saying that you will never make a mistake if you never try but if you try you make a mistake and then you can learn and move on.

L: like if you want to say it might be somehow confusing, but I can write it down and then try to pronounce (Lama)

It can be the noted that the learner's hesitation and open admission of difficulty (57) is probably due to anxiety and fear of making erroneous responses. In that light, the tutor's responsive strategy encouraging the learner through feedback that frames errors as an essential component of the learning process (58) significantly reduces learner apprehension. Framing errors as developmental indicates a facilitative rather an evaluative mindset, which encourages learners' continued effort and growth-mindset, thereby promoting competence beliefs (Mercer & Dörnyei, 2020). While the learning-by-error framing encourages participation by legitimising attempts and focusing on the value of effort instead of correctness, the following excerpt addresses learner anxiety and face protection more explicitly.

Extract 8

T: Okay, so now Eva, what do you understand by the word tense? What is tense? Yeah,
L4: I don't know **(laughs)**
T: just feel free, you know it you have been teaching it. Did you go on to teaching practice?
L4: Yes
T: Good.
L4: but I was not teaching English
T: No, feel free. Don't be ashamed… you can say anything you understand by the word tenses or tense?
L4: I think tenses refer to the time we do a particular action?
T: Yes, you see that's a very good try (Sagarr)

It can be noted that in this excerpt, feedback is more directly concerned with emotional safety and preserving learners' reputation. The affective reassurances encouraging learners to "feel free" in lines 68 and 73 may be interpreted as anticipatory treatment of learner anxiety and apprehension of errors. However, what distinguishes the feedback strategy in the excerpt is its direct reference to the emotional risk, the explicit mention of "shame" (73). This raises the emotional ramifications of errors to learners' personal identity, underscoring the tutor's concerns for the preservation of learner reputation. Addressing the potential for shame also reduces the perception of error as a source of peer judgement, thereby encouraging effort and promoting competence. Additionally, the affective assurances in both extracts indicate the tutors' interpersonal sensitivities and responsiveness, which strengthen relatedness feelings by signalling concern for learners' emotional well-being and social identity.

The tutors' interview responses provide a comparative perspective of how their pedagogical beliefs shape their competence-supportive practices.

I use encouraging feedback to motivate them to make efforts, especially when I feel that they scared of expressing themselves because they do not understand the topic and need help. Sometimes they will simply say no idea because they are afraid that their ideas are wrong and that they will be embarrassed if they give wrong answers because some teachers do that. (Lama)

You see, experts are of the view that the type of feedback you give determines how learners see themselves. If you condemn them when they give wrong answers or fall short, this damages their self-confidence, even for adult students. (Sagarr)

In Lama's narrative, a key phrase *"I use encouraging feedback to motivate them to make efforts"* suggests that his use of feedback as a motivational tool. Within the SDT framework, the explanation that learners are often reluctant to participate because of fear that *"they will be embarrassed if they give wrong answers"* suggests that Lama tends to perceive feedback as an instrument to reduce learner anxiety, apprehension, and reluctance to participate, which mirror his interactional practice. On the other hand, Sagarr's comments underscore his concern for learners' self-perceptions. His expert-grounded view that the *"feedback you give determines how learners see themselves"* supports his protective feedback strategy which shields learners from the affective consequences of inadequate or erroneous responses. By safeguarding learners' reputation, his intentions to preserve their *"self-confidence"* are consistent with his feedback technique. Together, the narratives indicate that both tutors' perceptions of feedback as a motivational rather an evaluational instrument are highly consistent with their classroom practices. This consistency is more likely to ensure emotionally and psychologically safe environments where learners may take risks and explore their potentials (Reeve & Cheon, 2021).

Tensions Between Guidance and Control

One of the key themes that emerged from the interactional data is how tensions between instructional guidance and pedagogical control appeared to undermine teachers' autonomy-supportive strategies and learner agency. Occurring in both open instruction and task environments, these instances highlighted misalignments between teachers' intentions to provide meaningful choices and controlling behaviours that appeared to pressure students towards specific teacher-determined directions and outcomes. The following excerpts demonstrate recurring tensions between choice and control.

Extract 9

T: so I will give one more example here … and then I want you to write either three examples of adverbs modifying verbs … or three examples of adverbs modifying adjectives … or three examples of adverbs modifying other adverbs … okay?

LL: /yes/yes/

T: You must derive your sentences from things that you do yourself maybe on a daily basis.

L: oh… can we work we work together to do that?

T: okay the three of you can work together. (Rama)

Extract 10

L: what I learn from the story is whenever you are marrying someone, don't look at the person's beauty or status (3) maybe the person is rich yes that is status because that one, whatever it take long, it will finish and the attitude will remain there forever

T: So as a teacher, is it okay… uh is it okay to read these types of stories to the young ones? Like elementary school is it good to tell them?

LL: /no/no/ (Mati)

Although both extracts above have been analysed before in relation to the tutors' autonomy-supportive practices, a closer analysis reveals tensions that complicate these practices. Set with choice (77-80), relevance (82-83), and perspective-taking (85), the task environment in Extract 9 offers a relatively high amount of autonomy support. However, the deontic framing of personal relevance with the obligatory "must" reveals a regulatory impulse that appears to undermine Rama's autonomy support. Similarly, while extract 10 provides evidence of Mati's autonomy-supportive questioning, it reveals controlling tendencies that weaken learner autonomy. Whereas the question in lines 90-91 appears open-ended, the tutor's use of leading expressions such as "is it okay to" and "is it good to" seems to be directing learners to a predetermined, teacher-approved answer. This controlling frame constrains learner voice by constricting the range of acceptable responses, positioning the tutor as the sole source and arbitrator of knowledge. As Fierro-Suero *et al.* (2024) indicate, when autonomy support is delivered with controlling tendencies, it threatens learners' motivational experience of agency.

Interestingly, interview remarks reveal that both tutors seem to know what they were doing, suggesting that the tensions were borne out meaningful contradictions rather than incidental inconsistencies.

The reason why I believe that's the best approach is because as individuals, if you feel you have a choice in what you are doing, then you tend to do it better. You tend to take responsibility of what you are doing, especially during learning. (Rama)

when I see that they are going in the wrong direction, I make sure that my questions are very clear so that they can see the direction to which they should go. Mostly when I put questions this way, they get the point and answer accordingly. (Mati)

These interview comments indicate that the tensions observed in both tutors' autonomy practices are reflected in their beliefs in conceptually different ways. For instance, Rama's view that choice encourages students *"to do it better"* suggests a conceptualization of autonomy as a means to improve performance rather than an inherent motivational requirement of language classrooms. This explains why her autonomy beliefs coincide with controlling practices aimed at improving performance. While Rama's beliefs suggest a performance-oriented practice of autonomy support, Mati's remarks evoke her belief that clarity overrides learner freedom. Her narrative strongly indicates that she occasionally reverts to controlling strategies by making her questions *"very clear"* when she perceives that learner maybe *"going in the wrong direction"*. This suggests that the tension observed in her questioning behaviour is perhaps due to deliberate pedagogical decisions to constrain, but not abandon autonomy. However, while both tutors' controlling practices may have been intended to increase performance and clarity, respectively, the externally-driven pressure involved may restrict learner autonomy and sustained engagement (Bartholomew *et al.*, 2017).

Institutional Pressure on Motivational Architecture

The analysis also indicates that tensions between tutor's interactional practices and their pedagogical intentions are often the result of institutional pressures that constrain teachers' motivational practices. The following excerpts demonstrate how institutionalised exam expectations lead teachers to controlling behaviours in situations where their intentions point towards their desire to provide guidance.

T: … now can we listen to her please?
L: good evening class=
T: =I am giving a direction from
L: aha… I am giving direction [from]
T: [a direction]

L: a…a direction=
T: =from
L: yes… erm…from… Kunkujang Keitaya=
T: =from Kunkujang Keitaya to…?
L: My…my… friend is coming from
T: =from Kunkujang Keitaya to? (Bayo)

This excerpt illustrates how the Bayo's attempts to provide accuracy-oriented support in the context of a fluency-based activity appeared to limit learners' self-initiation and expression. It can be seen that the tutor's discourse moves suggest his intention to provide scaffolding aimed at increasing learner competence. However, the micro-management of learner responses through constant latching, turn snatching, turn completions, and a sustained supply of "correct' forms transforms the intended guidance into directive control. When used in excess, these strategies encourage imitative learner responses instead of encouraging learners to self-repair. As Pehmer *et al.* (2014) suggest, feeding learners with correct forms prevents them from developing their own strategies to overcome language difficulties. Additionally, constant teacher interruptions in the excerpt indicate an extreme takeover that signals that learner efforts were highly inadequate. Collectively, these discourse moves restrict independent language practice and constrain both learner competence, sense of ownership and responsibility.

When asked to rationalise his discourse practices during the interview, Bayo's response revealed the effect of exam pressures on his interactional behaviour.

I was only looking for automation, perfection. That was why I was standing there now, constantly, constantly guiding them, because, after those few sessions, they are heading for exams, so, that was it. I was just doing that constant, constant guide, guide, just as a, as a sort of correction, to make perfection now, because they are heading for exams.

These comments suggest that Bayo's guidance practices are possibly constrained by his belief that a teacher-centred approach is necessary to prepare students for exams. His phrase *"because they are heading for exams"* emphasises the effect of accountability pressures on teachers to prepare students for exams. Thus, Bayo's philosophy of guidance and competence appears to be constrained by an exam-oriented culture that prioritises exam performance over the development of knowledge and skills. These expectations and pressures are often intensified by institutional frameworks that offer rewards and punishments in direct relation to exam performance. The consequences, as in Bayo's case above, often constrain teachers' autonomy practices, encouraging controlling, interventionist discourse aimed at enforcing, rather than developing competence. But as indicated by Patzak and Zhang. (2025), providing guidance in a controlling manner leads to counter-productive results, which reduces both learner autonomy and competence.

The following excerpt illustrates how such institutionally-driven exam pressures push teachers to orient discourse towards control and coverage.

T: okay… let's maintain decorum… okay we are asked to submit exam questions so we have to revise and make sure that we are on track with the course outline is that correct? Huh?

LL: /Yes Yes/

T: So that even I am not the one who set the questions anyone who sets the question will set the questions according to your standard meaning every one of you should master the course outline assigned to us… is that correct? ah? (Jalma)

As the opening move of the lesson, the exam-oriented frame of this extract has significant implications for both the interactional dynamics of the lesson and learners' motivational experiences. From the beginning, the directive for decorum (104) suggests authoritative control borne out of external pressures to remain focused. Accordingly, the tutor's use of authoritative language and classroom activity "to revise" are focused on exam preparedness, creating a lesson opening in which pedagogical orientation and learner participation are overshadowed by examination requirements. In this light, the comprehension checks (106, 110, 111) are more likely seeking compliance than encouraging learner thinking and participation. This demonstrates how exam-driven discourse pays little attention to learner voice, co-construction, and negotiation of meaning. Additionally, Jalma's warning that all students must master the course outline could possibly increase learners' performance anxiety, which reduces their self-efficacy beliefs. As an outcome of this exam-focused instruction, competence is framed in terms of exam results instead of real learning achievements (Ghaleb, 2024).

When prompted to discuss his motivational practices during the interview, Jalma's response reveals the extent to which institutionalised assessment criteria have normalised compliance-based discourse practices.

So, it's realized that those that are already in the system, they knew that if I complete my work, if I. have an IC or a failure, I will not able to get my attestation on time. They will be very much focused. So, you realize that because it's the college so the only way of dealing with them is through marks. (Jalma)

Interestingly, Jalma's perception of motivation appears to be constrained by institutionalised assessment rewards and consequences. These external inducements seem to have a strong influence on his discourse practices, confining learners to externally-driven rather than self-endorsed motivational experiences. The reference to late attestations, IC entries, and fail grades reflects the use of institutional authority as a motivating force to compel students to perform. This is consistent with his emphasis on course outlines, syllabi, exam deadlines, and assessment requirements to push students to comply. The interview comments suggest that the main goal of interaction is to meet such requirements instead of genuine learning. As Ryan and Deci (2017) emphasise, external threats are more likely to push students towards extrinsically motivated behaviours performed with resistance, disinterest, or resentment.

DISCUSSION

Overview of the Findings

The present study explored the motivational functions of teacher discourse in influencing ESL learners' perceptions of autonomy, competence and relatedness. In line with SDT perspective and SSMMD, teacher discourse was conceptualised as a contextual instrument that mediates between learners' inner motivational resources and their engagement behaviours. The findings indicate that beyond its mere instructional function, teacher discourse plays a constitutive role in constructing motivational classroom conditions that either encourage or restrict learner agency, participation, and effort. Overall, the study demonstrates that teachers' use of specific discourse patterns, including open-ended questioning, choice and relevance frames, structural support, affective feedback, and guidance based on accuracy, support or constrain motivational processes in varying degrees. Additionally, the study uncovers the existence of underlying tensions between teachers' autonomy practices and their pedagogical control, which are often aggravated by institutional and assessment requirements.

Activating Learner Agency and Voice Through Open Questioning

A key finding of the study is that open-ended and dialogic questioning consistently served as an effective autonomy-oriented strategy. Whenever teacher discourse practices reflected the use of open invitations, reflective prompting, and explorative follow-ups, learners were provided with open interactional space to articulate personal ideas and interpretations, justify their opinions, and evaluate their own contributions. These discourse strategies viewed learners as capable of meaningful contribution to the learning process rather than compliant listeners, thereby promoting learner agency and strengthening learner voice.

This finding is consistent with Reeve and Cheon (2021) who hold that by soliciting learner perspectives and self-initiated contributions, learner autonomy is interactively enhanced. Similarly, the finding echoes Alexander's (2020) argument that by validating multiple learner perspectives, dialogic questioning increases students' willingness to participate and extends their sense of reasoning. The analysis produces evidence which indicates further that open-ended inquiry leads to more intellectual stimulation that enables learners to produce longer, more interpretive, and analytical responses. This corroborates Son and Sun Young's (2024) view that, specifically in ESL contexts, referential and exploratory questioning elicit more extended learner turns, which increases students' cognitive engagement, particularly when teachers avoid enacting interactively evaluative closures.

This finding reflects a potential advancement of the engagement literature by demonstrating that beyond the interpretation of content knowledge, the effects of autonomy-enhancive questioning also affords learners opportunities for reflective self-appraisal. This is evidenced by the use of why-questions and probing follow-ups to encourage learners to assess their experiences and challenges, resonating with the notion of reflective endorsement of action (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Additionally, the gradual rise in cognitive demand noted in the elicitation patterns aligns with Uştuk and Hu's (2025) conclusion that scaffolded dialogic inquiry promotes autonomous engagement by incrementally shifting cognitive responsibility to students.

Enhancing Task Ownership Through Choice and Personal Relevance

The results also suggest that the discourse of task design, especially the use of meaningful choice and relevance, promoted learners' sense of ownership and volition. When teachers enabled learners to make task choices and encouraged them to connect the tasks to their own experiences, learners displayed greater initiative and participation. These findings complement previous research (Assor *et al.,* 2002; Patall *et al.,* 2008) which found that choice enhances intrinsic motivation when it is perceived as meaningful rather than superficial. The present findings also validate further contemporary research underpinning SDT, that choice without perceivable structure and relevance will prove ineffectual. Vo (2023) demonstrated that choice without framing can overwhelm learners or simply fail to promote engagement, when placed outside the context of perceived importance by students.

The coupling of autonomy and structure evident in this study aligns with the notion of an optimal point between autonomy and guidance put forward by Fierro-Suero *et al.* (2024). That the most effective motivational conditions provide learners with agency while balancing it with direction. It is by locating choice within well-defined parameters and explaining the rationale behind it that teachers may establish conditions wherein students are motivated to invest effort of their own volition. Yet, the interview data revealed a tendency among teachers to think of autonomy mainly in terms of choice, overlooking other ways in which relevance and rationale can support motivation. Such a narrow framing might partly explain why autonomy-supportive practices are not uniformly distributed across lessons.

Building Competence Through Structured Guidance and Explicit Goal Setting

One of the major findings of the study is that the explicit communication of lesson goals, what constitutes success, and lesson structure enhanced learners' experience of competence and self-regulatory practices. The study demonstrates that tutors who effectively articulated expected learner outcomes and connected current lessons to previous knowledge provided learners with cognitive clarity and evaluative benchmarks. This finding validates Skinner and Pitzer's (2012) argument that effective structure plays an important role in encouraging students to view tasks as achievable and meaningful. Wang *et al.* (2024) show that explicit articulation of lesson objectives enhances learners' self-monitoring and competence abilities. Referring specifically to teacher-training contexts, Mercer and Dörnyei's (2020) argumentation suggests that effective modelling of instructional procedure enhances professional competence, a trend evident in Sagarr's discourse.

By decomposing complex goals into smaller objectives and connecting new information to learners' existing knowledge, teachers implemented what is described by Mayer (2004) as coherence and signalling principles, which ease cognitive load and promote mastery. These results corroborate the SDT claim that competence and self-efficacy beliefs are not strengthened via evaluative pressure, but through interactional clarity that allows students to perceive their own effectiveness.

Affective Feedback and the Normalisation of Error

The present study also demonstrates that feedback mechanisms that legitimise errors and tackle learners' emotional concerns were effective strategies in encouraging effort and maintaining engagement. Teachers who positioned errors as a component of learning, provided comfort, and tackled emotional obstacles of fear and shame, established emotionally safe environments in which students were more willing to take up risks and challenges. This is highly consistently with work on emotional safety in language classrooms by Mercer and Dörnyei (2020), which demonstrates that students' volitional participation is largely contingent on how teachers handle learner errors and wrong or incomplete responses. This is particularly relevant for L2 settings such as The Gambia where learner proficiency may be limited due to a restricted use of English to the classroom context alone, which may also increase students' language anxiety levels. In that sense, normalisation of errors and affective feedback practices align with Dewaele and Li's (2020) demonstration that student anxiety diminishes when teachers implement non-evaluative and supportive feedback techniques. Through SDT lens, these feedback practices promote both competence and relatedness by affirming learner efforts and bolstering their reputation (Deci & Ryan, 2017).

The current finding offers a contribution that potentially extends the literature by demonstrating the dual function affective feedback can offer learners at both instructional and interpersonal levels. By explicitly mentioning and addressing shame and encouraging learners to "feel free", tutors were not merely rectifying mistakes but were also shielding learners from affective risks of participation. This echoes Reeve and Cheon's (2021) observation that, in addition to cognitive progress, teachers' autonomy-enhancing practices should also recognise and address learners' emotional concerns in relation to the learning process.

Institutional Constraints on the Motivational Structure

Finally, the analysis shows how institutional and assessment requirements constrain teachers' motivational practices, typically pushing them towards controlling, accuracy, and performance-based discourse. This finding informs that exam-driven settings tend to prioritise fast, autonomation-, coverage-, and accuracy-based interaction, which pressurises teachers into frequent interruption, turn completion, immediate correction, and authoritative language, diminishing students' chances for self-rectification and autonomous learning.

This finding resonates with empirical evidence from Pehmer *et al.* (2014) who illustrate that extreme teacher interruption constrains learner autonomy and strategic abilities. The excessive guidance inherent in these strategies appears to amplify the potency of institutional pressures for teachers to focus on learners' exam-readiness instead of developing linguistic knowledge and skills, aligning with Walsh's (2006) claim that incongruence between teaching goals and discourse procedures constricts learning opportunities. From a SDT standpoint, exam-based pressure exemplifies external regulation, which is correlated with diminished volition, superficial engagement, and low perseverance (Deci & Ryan, 2017).

By emphasising teachers' own experiences of exam pressure, the present study enhances current research by demonstrating that the motivational architecture of teacher discourse is not exclusively teacher-dependent, but also institutionally influenced. Teachers' goals to foster competence were frequently superseded by accountability pressures, leading to discourse practices that ironically hindered engagement.

CONCLUSION

The present research analysed teacher discourse as a motivational structure in the ESL classroom, applying SDT and SSMMD to examine how learners' autonomy, competence, and relatedness experiences are shaped in the course of classroom interaction. Through the combination of classroom discourse analysis and teachers' post-observation interview reflections, the study posits that motivation and engagement are not fixed learner traits but rather contingent outcomes of discourse practices within pedagogical, interpersonal, and institutional settings.

The findings reveal that autonomy-supportive teaching practices, such as open and dialogic questioning, offering meaning choice, and framing relevance, extend participatory space and encourage learner voice, initiative, and ownership of the learning process. Learner competence was supported through explicit goal setting, structured guidance, and feedback that legitimised errors and thus made participation less emotionally costly and enhanced relatedness feelings. These discourse strategies collectively improved learners' inclination to participate, persevere, face challenges, and take risks, demonstrating how teacher discourse constructs motivational support at both cognitive and affective levels. Simultaneously, the study uncovered underlying tensions between guidance and control, especially when teachers' discourse practices limited student contribution to ensure clarity, accuracy, or lesson advancement. Such tensions were frequently exacerbated by institutionalised assessment requirements and accountability pressures, which induced controlling instructional strategies detrimental to autonomy and self-regulation experiences.

In theory, the current investigation enhances SDT and SSMMD studies by highlighting how learners' motivational needs are interactively negotiated by teacher discourse at the micro-level. It expands current motivation research by demonstrating how context, self-system processes, and engagement-indicative behaviours are intertwined in naturally-occurring classroom discourse, thus providing an empirical perspective of motivation as an interactional outcome. The research expands understanding of language classroom discourse by spotlighting the psychological implications of teacher talk, beyond mere descriptions of teacher discourse patterns to unpack their motivational outcomes.

The findings of the study have significant pedagogical implications regarding the importance of interactional awareness in ESL teaching and learning especially. Teachers can increase learners' motivation through elicitation patterns that encourage multiple learner perspectives, task preparation strategies that simultaneously offer choice, highlight relevance and indicate rationale, and feedback that recognises effort and provides emotional security. Therefore, teacher education programmes should include reflective classroom discourse analysis in order to raise teachers' awareness of the motivational implications of their moment-by-moment interactional and pedagogical decisions on learners' psychological processes. At the institutional level, the research portrays the need to reframe exam-based, performance-driven instructional frameworks that value control and coverage over learner agency.

In the end, the study confirms that motivation is neither static, nor taught, but interactively co-produced during discourse. This strengthens the conceptualisation of teacher discourse as a principal resource in nurturing engaged and self-determined language learners.

Declarations

Data Availability and Materials

The datasets analysed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

Competing Interests

The authors hereby declare that they have no competing interests.

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Authors' Contributions

carried out the research while SM guided and supervised the whole process.

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Ethical Approval

The research was carried out in line with ethical principles regarding acceptance, access, informed consent, voluntary participation, anonymity, and confidentiality to protect participants' rights and dignity, as established in the British Educational Research Association (BERA) Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research (2018). Formal institutional approval was obtained from both the Board of Advanced Studies and Research (BASR) of the University of Lahore and the Ethics Committee of the Gambia College.

Human Ethics

The research included human participants and adopted internationally established ethical standards and principles regarding educational research.

Consent to Participate

Informed consent was obtained from all participants in the study before data collection. Participants were informed about the aims of the study, their right to withdraw at any time without explanation or consequences, and were also assured of confidentiality and anonymity.

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