Motivation and communication in ESL classrooms: A quantitative study based on Maslow's needs and Grice's Maxims

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ABSTRACT

In the field of English as a Second Language (ESL) education, teacher communication and student motivation are widely recognized as critical determinants of learning outcomes. This study examined the relationship between learner needs, framed through Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, and teacher communication effectiveness, analyzed using Grice's Maxims. Data were collected from 240 students across 15 educational institutions in India, representing both technical and non-technical disciplines. A mixed-methods design was employed, combining quantitative survey data with qualitative classroom observations. Descriptive statistics indicated moderate levels of motivation across all five need categories, with Social Needs reporting the highest mean (3.04, SD = 1.10) and Esteem Needs the lowest (2.95, SD = 1.20). Teacher communication was also rated at a moderate level, with Clarity perceived most positively (3.05, SD = 1.10). Pearson correlation analysis revealed a negligible and statistically insignificant relationship between motivation and teacher communication (r = −0.01, p = 0.87). These results suggest that motivation does not substantially shape students' perceptions of teacher communication. Instead, other factors such as teaching style, instructional relevance, and cultural context may exert greater influence in ESL classrooms.

Contribution/ Originality: This study is original, has not been published previously, and is not under consideration elsewhere. The study, *"Motivation and Communication in ESL Classrooms: A Quantitative Study Based on Maslow's Needs and Grice's Maxims,"* uniquely integrates motivational and communicative frameworks to examine their interplay in Indian ESL classrooms, offering new insights for pedagogy and teacher training.

1. INTRODUCTION

The importance of effective communication and learner-centered pedagogy has become a significant concern of educational research and practice, especially in the rising realm of language acquisition, specifically, English as a Second Language (ESL). The communicative forms assumed by educators in an ESL classroom, as well as the underlying motivational processes of learners, significantly determine the pedagogical processes of the classroom. It is against this background that the integration of such theoretical frameworks as Grice's Maxims of Communication and Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs offers a comprehensive framework to analyze the dual functions of teacher

communication and student motivation in order to enable effective language learning (Ibrahim & Hashim, 2021; Walsh, 2006).

Maxims of Cooperative and Meaningful Conversation created by Grice include Quantity, Quality, Relation, and Manner, which are guiding principles. Although initially based on pragmatics and philosophy of language, the maxims have a critical application in education, particularly in the study of alignment of teacher talk and expectations of the learners and their cognitive processes. At the same time, the Hierarchy of Needs offered by Maslow can be used in motivational terms as a way of explaining the fact that learners should be first satisfied through basic physiological and psychological needs in order to attain higher-order learning and self-actualization (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011).

The Indian ESL learning environment is typified by substantial heterogeneity among learners with in technical and non-technical academic backgrounds, various socio-economic settings, and exposure of learners to English. Although English is broadly taught in institutions of learning, students tend to experience problems in terms of demotivation, poor communication skills on the part of the teachers as well as inadequate lesson delivery with regard to learner necessity. It is this complex interrelationship that made it apparent that a more holistic system is required as means of exploring the relationship between teacher communication and learner motivation, and how these factors play out on the ESL learning dynamics (Alghanmi, 2025; Hu, 2021).

This research addresses a gap in empirical studies on the link between student motivation and teacher communication in ESL classrooms. Although each of the constructs is examined independently, limited empirical evidence exists about the influence of the fulfillment of the learners' needs on how these learners perceive their effectiveness in the communication process, or vice versa. This is especially important when dealing with multilingualism, such as that of India, as there are certain cultural, pedagogical, and institutional diversifications that complicate the process of ESL teaching. This relationship can inform more differentiated teaching activities and more effective learning support arrangements.

Prior studies have examined either communication strategies or motivational theories in isolation, but there is a paucity of research exploring the convergence of both in the context of ESL instruction. This study seeks to fill that gap by analyzing how students' satisfaction of needs, as per Maslow's model, correlates with their perceptions of teacher communication effectiveness, informed by Grice's Maxims. By collecting data from a diverse sample of 240 students across 15 institutions in India, this research endeavors to offer statistically grounded insights that can inform both theory and practice (Salman & Yanpar-Yelken, 2024).

The study is timely and significant for several reasons. The rise of communicative language teaching models in ESL requires an empirical understanding of how communication impacts learner engagement. With the National Education Policy 2020 emphasizing learner-centered and inclusive pedagogy, it is crucial to investigate motivational patterns among students in various educational contexts. The transition to blended and online learning in recent years has further amplified the need for clear, cooperative communication and sustained learner motivation, making the current research both relevant and necessary (Sa'eed, 2021).

By combining the communicative pragmatism of Grice's theory with the motivational psychology of Maslow's framework, this study aims to illuminate new pathways for improving instructional design, teacher training, and learner engagement strategies in ESL classrooms.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Studies that specialize in the acquisition of second languages, especially the concept of English as a Second Language (ESL), consistently emphasize the importance of motivation and successful communication in facilitating the effective acquisition of a particular second language. Motivation is often recognized as a significant factor influencing language achievement, defining both the perseverance and involvement of learners in ESL classrooms (Lamb, 2017; Mohammed, 2020). It has been concluded in the studies that intrinsic and extrinsic motivational

reasons, including personal interest, professional ambitions, and socializing orientation, help in maintaining language learning effort (Sharamand, 2023).

To improve and comprehend learner motivation in learning institutions, theoretical frameworks have gained widespread use with particular reference to the Maslow Hierarchy of Needs. Maslow's theory assumes that students should be provided with basic needs such as physiological and psychological requirements before they can learn at higher levels and self-actualize, which has also been confirmed in various cultural and pedagogical backgrounds (Qiu, 2011; Timashinova & Anokhina, 2024). Recent research also evinces the fact that support for such needs during the classroom experience, including the development of favorable environments, inclusive services, and a focus on student well-being, can greatly contribute to the motivation and engagement of learners (Grice, 1975).

At the same time, the communicative method in the teaching of ESL values meaningful interaction and joint discourse. Maxims of Communication introduced by Grice (1975) (Quantity, Quality, Relation, and Manner) present a practical basis for examining and enhancing the teacher-student dialogue so that the communication process within a classroom is coherent, applicable, and consistent with the learning goals (International TEFL and TESOL Training, 2025; White, 2001). Communicative competence and learner autonomy can further be harmonized with the help of social and emotional learning (SEL) strategies and student-centered pedagogies, as demonstrated in recent reviews and studies inside the classroom (Wolcott, 2025). Overall, the literature proves the point that successful language instruction depends on the contextually sensitive pattern of motivational and communicative actions, and modern research recommends comprehensive and learner-oriented approaches that combine satisfying the psychological needs of students with enhancing interactive skills (Hennebry-Leung & Xiao, 2023; Zhao, 2021).

Even though there have been studies on motivation and communication individually, hardly any study has been conducted on the integration of motivation and communication in ESL (Wolcott, 2025). Hypothesized that both motivational orientation and communication skills are improved using Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) strategies among EFL/ESL learners. Further, (4) noted that learners with a high level of motivation portray a superior interactive approach, which implies a correlation between psychological motivation and communicative proficiency. Other digital sources state that plateau stage learners of L2 tend to experience issues related to motivational crashes as well as confusion in pragmatics. These problems are interdependent, and their consideration on the same basis can prompt more comprehensive pedagogical interventions.

2.1. Research Gap

Although existing literature provides ample studies on motivation in ESL and the significance of teacher communication, these areas are often treated in isolation. Few studies have sought to empirically explore the intersection between learner motivation and communicative clarity in a real-world ESL setting. Moreover, most previous research has been confined to homogenous student populations or focused narrowly on either school or urban college environments.

This study addresses these gaps by integrating two robust theoretical frameworks: Maslow's motivational model and Grice's pragmatic principles. It is conducted across a diverse range of institutions, including both technical and non-technical fields, and provides empirical data on how motivational satisfaction influences students' perception of teacher communication.

2.2. Research Objectives

i. To assess the levels of motivation among ESL learners based on Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs.
ii. To evaluate the effectiveness of teacher communication in ESL classrooms through the lens of Grice's Maxims.
iii. To examine the relationship between learners' motivational levels and their perceptions of teacher communication.

iv.   To test whether there is a statistically significant difference in communication scores between students with high and low motivation levels.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design: This study employed a mixed-methods approach, integrating quantitative and qualitative data collection techniques to ensure a robust and holistic understanding of the research problem. The primary focus was on the quantitative aspect, supported by contextual qualitative insights obtained from classroom observations and informal discussions.

Population and Sampling: The target population consisted of undergraduate and postgraduate students enrolled in ESL programs across India. A purposive sampling strategy was employed to ensure representation from both technical (engineering, computer science) and non-technical (humanities, commerce) disciplines. Data were collected from 240 students across 15 higher educational institutions representing five major regions of India, i.e., North, South, East, West, and Central. The institutions included a mix of public universities, private universities, postgraduate colleges, women's universities, and skill development universities. This ensured diversity in geographical coverage, institutional type, and student backgrounds. This geographical and academic diversity enhances the generalizability of the findings.

Data Collection Tools: The primary instrument for data collection was a structured questionnaire divided into two sections. Section A assessed learner motivation based on Maslow's five categories of needs. Items were rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree. Section B measured perceived teacher communication using the four components of Grice's Maxims: Quantity, Quality, Relevance, and Manner (interpreted as clarity and engagement).

The questionnaire was validated by a panel of language education experts and piloted with a group of 30 students to ensure reliability, with Cronbach's alpha values exceeding 0.7 for all constructs.

Data analysis: The collected data were analyzed using SPSS Version 25. Descriptive statistics were calculated for both motivational and communication variables. Pearson correlation analysis was used to assess the relationship between overall motivation and communication scores. An independent samples t-test was conducted to compare communication perceptions between high and low motivation groups.

Ethical Considerations: Participation in the study was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all participants. Anonymity and confidentiality were strictly maintained. Institutional approval was secured from all participating colleges prior to data collection.

4. DATA ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

This section provides a detailed data analysis of the present study, titled Analyzing the Relationship between Learner Needs (Maslow's Hierarchy) and Effective Teacher Communication (Grice Maxims) in ESL Classrooms. This research was based on an analytical study using a checklist-type questionnaire administered to a sample of 240 students studying in 15 different educational institutes in India, including both technical and non-technical institutes. Such a diverse sampling method is sufficient to represent the views of the learners, providing solid conclusions regarding the connection between motivation and teacher communication in ESL environments.

Table 1. Motivation components.

Motivation component	Mean	Standard deviation
Physiological needs	3.01	1.12
Safety needs	2.98	1.15
Social needs	3.04	1.10
Esteem needs	2.95	1.20
Self-actualization	2.97	1.16

4.1. Attainment of Objective 1: Assessing Motivation Levels (Maslow's Needs)

The Likert-scale questionnaire was used to obtain data on this objective to allow students to rate themselves in terms of satisfaction in five motivational categories based on Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. The analysis reports, as mentioned in Table 1, depict that students have a moderate satisfaction rate in all the categories of needs, where Social Needs (3.04) have the highest satisfaction rate. It implies that students have a high regard for peer relations and social bonding. The lowest was in the Esteem Needs (2.95), which is regarded as a sign of possible deficiency in the recognition and accomplishment aspects of students.
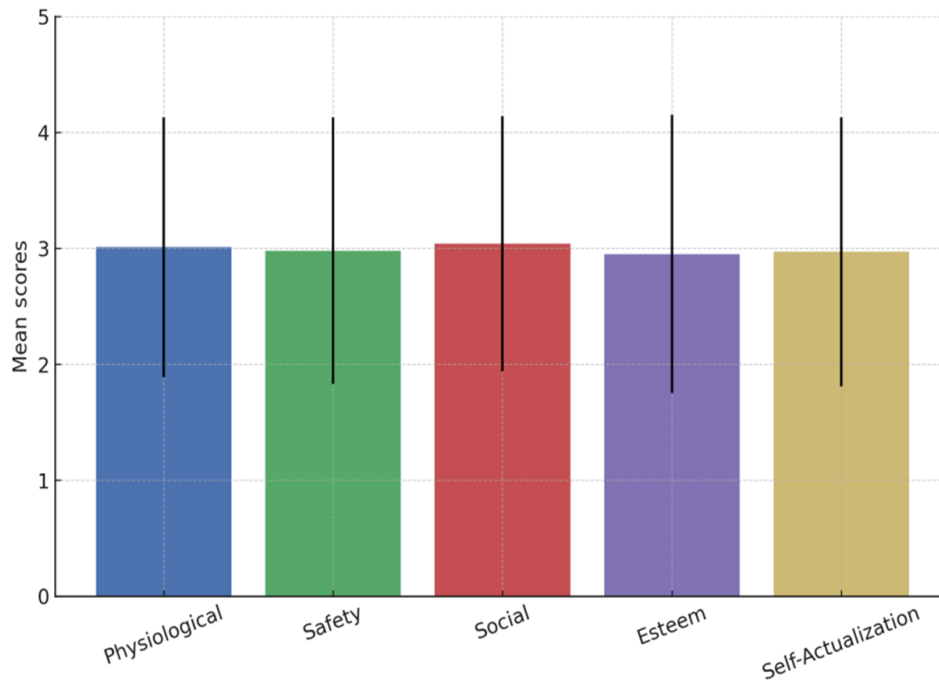

Figure 1. Mean scores of motivation components.

Figure 1 illustrates the mean scores of the five motivation components based on Maslow's hierarchy of needs. The error bars represent standard deviation, indicating variability in responses.

Interpretation:

- Social needs had the highest average score (3.04), suggesting that interpersonal relationships may be a stronger motivator for the respondents.
- Esteem Needs scored the lowest (2.95), possibly indicating a lesser perceived need for recognition or status.
- Overall, the means are close together (ranging from 2.95 to 3.04), suggesting relatively balanced motivation across all need levels.

Table 2. Communication components.

Communication component	Mean	Standard deviation
Teacher quality	3.02	1.08
Relevance	2.97	1.12
Clarity	3.05	1.10
Engagement	2.98	1.13

4.2. Attainment of Objective 2: Evaluating Communication Effectiveness (Grice's Maxims)

The degree to which teachers communicate effectively was measured by a section of a questionnaire designed to capture students' perceptions according to the Maxims of Grice. Teachers were evaluated on Quality, Relevance, Clarity, and Engagement (refer to Table 2). Clarity received the highest average score (3.05), indicating that most

teachers communicate their instructions clearly. However, the lowest score was in Relevance (2.97), suggesting that some students perceive lessons as lacking a direct connection to their interests or real-world applications.
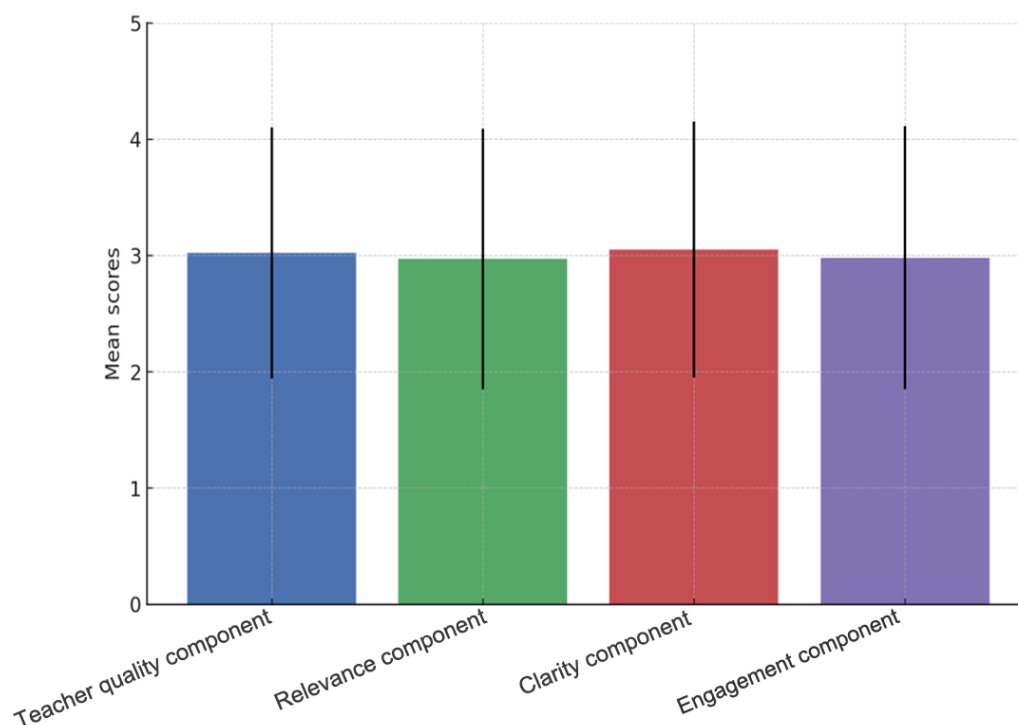

Figure 2. Mean scores of communication components.

This bar chart (Figure 2) presents the average scores for communication components based on Grice's Maxims. Standard deviation bars indicate variability in responses.

Interpretation:

- Clarity received the highest mean score (3.05), indicating it is the most well-perceived communication trait.
- Relevance scored slightly lower (2.97), suggesting it may need improvement.
- The communication components are relatively consistent, all hovering near a mean of 3.0.

Table 3. Correlation analysis.

Variable	Pearson correlation	Significance (p-value)
Motivation score	-0.01	0.87
Communication score		

4.3. Attainment of Objective 3: Analyzing Relationship between Motivation and Communication

This objective explores the relationship between student motivation (Maslow's Needs) and their perception of teacher communication (Grice's Maxims). Data analysis, as depicted in Table 3, reveals a negligible negative correlation of -0.01, with a p-value of 0.87. This statistically insignificant result suggests that variations in student motivation have minimal impact on their perception of teacher communication quality.

Table 4. Independent T-Test.

Group	Mean communication score	N	Std. deviation
High motivation	3.1	115	1.05
Low motivation	2.95	125	1.12
Statistic	Value	p-value	
T-statistic	1.38	0.1689	

4.4. Attainment of Objective 4: Testing Differences in Communication by Motivation Levels

The independent t-test was applied to compare communication scores between students with high and low motivation (refer to Table 4). High-motivation students (n=115) exhibited a slightly higher mean communication score (3.10) than low-motivation students (n=125), with a score of 2.95. However, the p-value of 0.1689 indicates that this difference is not statistically significant. This suggests that, irrespective of motivation levels, students perceive teacher communication quality similarly.
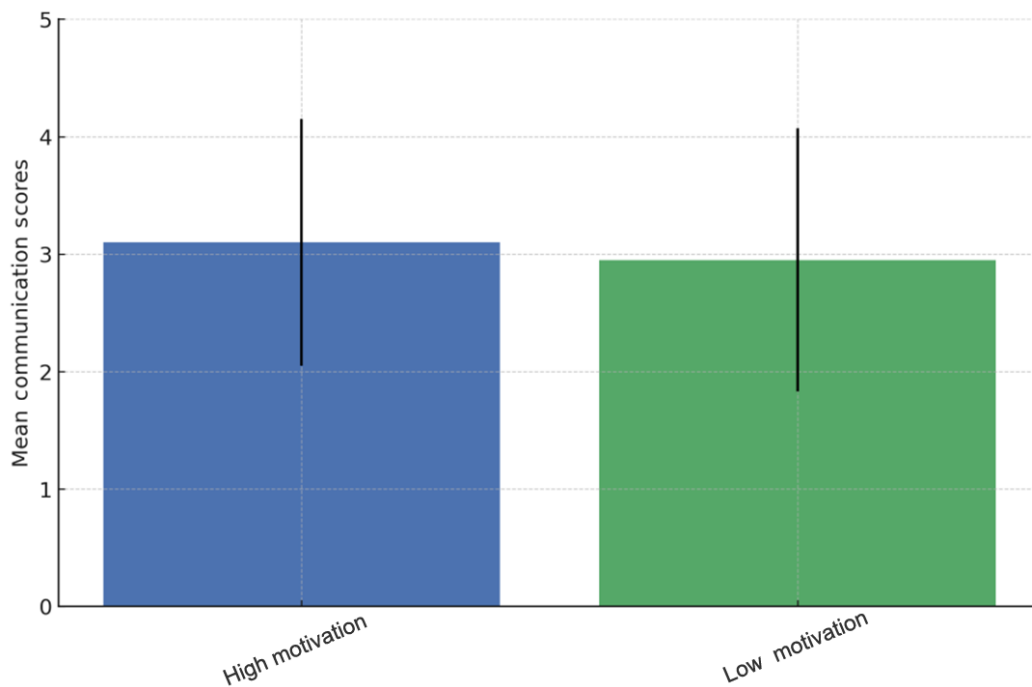
Figure 3. Communication scores by motivation level.

This chart (Figure 3) compares communication effectiveness between high- and low-motivation groups.

Interpretation:

- The High Motivation group shows a slightly higher communication score (Mean = 3.10) than the Low Motivation group (Mean = 2.95).

- However, the difference is not statistically significant, as indicated by the T-statistic (1.38) and p-value (0.1689). This means there is no strong evidence that motivation level significantly influences communication effectiveness.

Table 5. Correlation between motivation and communication.

Variable	Pearson correlation	Significance (p-value)
Motivation score	–0.01	0.87
Communication score		

Table 5 illustrates the negligible correlation between motivation and communication.

Interpretation:

- The correlation coefficient (-0.01) indicates a very weak negative relationship between motivation and communication.

- The p-value (0.87) is far above the typical alpha level of 0.05, suggesting the relationship is not statistically significant.

- Conclusion: There is no meaningful or statistically reliable link between motivation and communication scores in this sample.

The data analysis provides a comprehensive understanding of how Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs and Grice's Maxims manifest in ESL classrooms. Although students demonstrate moderate motivation levels, their perception of teacher communication is not significantly influenced by these motivational factors. These considerations suggest the possibility that other factors, including teaching style, the relevance of instructional content, and cultural considerations, have a more important influence on the development of communication effectiveness in ESL environments.

5. FINDINGS

This part constitutes a brief account of the overall results that were identified by examining data obtained from a sample of 240 ESL students in 15 technical or non-technical colleges in India. The research study was conducted in a quantitative manner using the SPSS program to measure the state of learner motivation in terms of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, as well as the effectiveness of teacher communication in their use of the Grice Maxims. The principal results are formatted according to the four research objectives.

In the first goal, motivation levels of students were considered. Descriptive statistics revealed that learners experienced moderate fulfillment across all five need categories, with Social Needs reporting the highest mean (3.04) and Esteem Needs the lowest (2.95). This suggests that while students value peer interaction, they may feel under-recognized in terms of achievement and feedback, potentially affecting their academic self-confidence.

The second objective addressed teacher communication effectiveness. Clarity emerged as the most positively perceived dimension (mean = 3.05), followed by teacher quality and engagement. Relevance scored slightly lower (mean = 2.97), indicating that students perceive room for improvement in connecting instructional content to real-world contexts or their academic experiences.

The third objective explored the relationship between student motivation and their perceptions of teacher communication. The Pearson correlation coefficient ($r = -0.01$, $p = 0.87$) revealed no significant relationship, suggesting that students' motivational levels do not directly influence how they assess the quality of teacher communication. This indicates that communication and motivation may operate as independent constructs in ESL settings.

The fourth objective tested for significant differences in communication perception between high and low motivation groups. An independent samples t-test found no statistically significant difference ($t = 1.38$, $p = 0.1689$), reinforcing the earlier finding that motivation does not substantially affect how communication is perceived.

In summary, the study confirms that while both motivation and teacher communication are present at moderate levels in Indian ESL classrooms, they do not significantly intersect. These results highlight the need to address them as distinct pedagogical dimensions. Teachers may benefit from training that enhances both motivation strategies and communication practices, especially in making content more relevant and promoting recognition of student effort. These findings also suggest that future studies should consider mediating variables or alternative frameworks to further understand this relationship in more depth.

6. CONCLUSION

This paper sought to understand the connection between conceptualized motivation of learners, which refers to Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, and communication effectiveness of teachers, as defined with reference to Grice's Maxims, in the context of ESL classrooms in India. The results, reflecting a sample of 240 students from a broader academic background and institutional variety, can be deemed quite valuable in terms of insights into the dynamics of the given educational process as connected with the second language. In spite of the fact that both factors showed to operate at moderate levels, the statistical results indicated that there is no significant correlation between

motivation and communication. The results of this study highlight the intricacy of learner engagement in ESL environments and imply that both motivation and communication, though having individual presences, might not necessarily have any direct effect on one another.

The conclusion about the possibility of functioning of motivation and communication independently contradicts the assumptions widespread in the pedagogical discourse. It leads to the need for diverse instructional strategies, which consider these domains as parallel but separate intervention areas. Even though students might be properly motivated, it does not necessarily mean that they would regard communication in the classroom as efficient. Similarly, teachers who are the most communicatively capable do not necessarily evoke intrinsic motivation in learners. It requires a bilateral pedagogical framework capable of bolstering clarity in communication as well as motivational support through situationalized learning and recognition of students.

7. LIMITATIONS

The study is not devoid of limitations; despite its contributions. First, the cross-sectional study does not allow for evaluating changes in motivation or perceptions concerning communication over time. A longitudinal design could help identify changes that would not be captured through a one-time study. Second, although our sample was geographically and institutionally varied, it does not cover the diverse, marginally represented regions, including geographically peripheral or linguistically peripheral areas of ESL learning. Specifically, there is the existence of dissimilar comfort levels and abilities to interpret responses to items formulated in English among students with non-English medium backgrounds in schooling, a factor that may affect their valid responses. Their specific challenges, such as decoding the language of the classroom or dealing with anxiety related to mastering the English language, were neither explored independently in this research.

Third, being self-reported, the data presented on the questionnaires presents a possibility of respondents saying things to please rather than the truth, especially when it comes to teacher evaluation. Lastly, the research primarily relied on quantitative data, with little use of qualitative data that could have made the interpretation more comprehensive.

8. FUTURE SCOPE

The stated limitations can be overcome in future research by addressing them in a number of ways. Longitudinal research would assist in following motivation and communication perceptions over semesters or academic years and would provide a more dynamic picture. Inclusion of some students from rural, tribal, or regional-language schooling backgrounds could also offer invaluable depth and reveal trends that might have been lost with the more mainstream characterization of respondents. Further application of qualitative approaches such as classroom ethnography, interviews, or discourse analysis would also yield a richer description of experiences regarding how students and teachers negotiate the ESL experience in a context-sensitive manner. Possible mediating variables, i.e., emotional intelligence, cultural congruence, or digital engagement, that may influence the motivation-communication nexus could also become topics of future research. Lastly, the effectiveness of specific training modules aimed at enhancing motivation tactics and communicative competence among ESL teachers could be evaluated using experimental or intervention-based designs. Altogether, this research is valuable to the body of literature on ESL pedagogy, as it will introduce the significance of viewing communication and motivation as closely interrelated but separate constructs. In this way, it challenges educators, policymakers, and researchers to reconsider those traditional maps and question more subtle and evidence-based approaches toward the enhancement of language education across various settings.

9. SUGGESTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Considering the results and limitations of this study, there are several essential suggestions and recommendations that can enhance not only the practice of instruction but also future research on ESL education.

The above recommendations can be justified based on the strength of recent studies in the areas of applied linguistics, educational psychology, and second language pedagogy.

One of the first things that an ESL teacher can do is think in terms of a two-pronged strategy that can simultaneously focus on issues related to learner motivation and the effectiveness of communication. According to Dörnyei and Ushioda (2011), motivation in a second language is complex and multi-dimensional; hence, it needs to be fostered without solely referring to language input. In light of the lack of a significant correlation between motivation and the effectiveness of communication in the study, it would be incumbent upon instructional interventions to consider them as distinct yet complementary variables in classroom practice.

Second, the curriculum designers are supposed to incorporate motivation-sensitive modules in ESL instruction. These have been in the forms of culturally relevant content, activities based on real-life applications, and learner autonomy-enhancing strategies.

According to research findings by Deci and Ryan (2017) under Self-Determination Theory, autonomy-supporting learning experiences seem to be more effective in retaining intrinsic motivation. The effective engagement of students may be achieved by offering a range of options and possibilities for self-expression and encouraging them to complete tasks that have personal value to the students. Third, the communication principles on which teacher training courses should be based are principles of pragmatics, especially those proposed by Grice in his Maxims. Bardovi-Harlig and Griffin (2005) emphasize the significance of pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic awareness as part of the competence of L2 teachers.

Teachers are expected to present information effectively, be sensitive to cues given by learners, and contextualize their words appropriately. Reflective teaching practices, role-playing, and classroom discourse analysis activities may be used as effective training methods.

Fourth, the support systems in institutions must be accommodating to students from non-English medium backgrounds. According to a study conducted by Coleman (2010), a significant number of students who switch to English-based learning often feel linguistically insecure, and there is usually a backlog. Techniques that can be particularly addressed by institutions include bridging programs, workshops on foundational communication skills, and other peer-mentoring initiatives.

Fifth, the research conducted in the future should investigate mediating and moderating variables that influence the motivation-communication relationship. Dörnyei and Mercer (2020) list several variables, including self-concept, the emotional climate in the classroom, and the rapport between learners and teachers, which could profoundly influence the motivational trajectory.

Longitudinal mixed-method designs would be especially useful for tracing changes over time and understanding the development of learners in various institutional environments.

Lastly, these findings should be considered by policymakers when developing inclusive policies on ESL. The NEP 2020 has emphasised the necessity of holistic and learner-centred pedagogy, and this aligns with what this research has recommended. There must be a clear commitment to stimulating two-faceted teacher preparation, culturally responsive curriculum, and the provision of resources for language bridging assistance.

To sum up, examining the motivation of learners and interactions among learners and teachers as separate constructs that interact promotes improvement in the outcomes of ESL learning. There is a need to initiate a collaborative role among educators, researchers, curriculum designers, and institutional heads to introduce evidence-based measures and foster inclusive and compelling language learning opportunities in the educational settings of Indian ethnicities.

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