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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 discourse and thematic analysis that is guided by 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. The findings reveal that teacher discourse patterns do not function merely as instructional instruments but as critical resources that can either support or constrain learner autonomy, competence, and relatedness. The findings also reveal that institutional realities often shape teachers' interactional decisions and influence the extent to which motivational discourse can be sustained. Based on the 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.

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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). As a result, classroom discourse is recognised both as an instructional instrument and an interactive motivational resource via which learning opportunities and learner participation can be enhanced or restricted (Walsh, 2002, 2006; Wei et al., 2022).

Research in the field of motivation has been firmly influenced by Self-Determination Theory (SDT), 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, 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 SSMD (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.

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.

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 SSMD 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

Defining Teacher Discourse Patterns

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 classroom discourse.

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 (Walsh, 2006). More specifically, it may 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). Regulated by established communication patterns and norms, such as questioning patterns, feedback norms, and scaffolding techniques, teacher discourse is not merely the transference of knowledge. Instead, it is both strategic and multidimensional, comprising communication patterns and interactional features that convey knowledge and influence motivation and engagement simultaneously. 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 ESL classrooms where it functions both as vehicle and object of instruction (Walsh, 2006).

Within ESL classrooms, teacher discourse patterns have been described as recurring structures of communication such as the Initiation-Response-Feedback (IRF) sequence (Tong et al., 2024, Walsh, 2002). Research on this discourse pattern indicates that it may either constrain or enhance motivation depending on how teachers utilize it. For instance, Chen (2022) and Hidayatullah (2024) indicate that the unequal relations and controlled environment reflected by tightly structured IRF exchanges reduce learner participation, agency and sense of ownership. These studies suggest that teacher-dominated IRF interaction weakens self-determined motivation by undermining learners' basic psychological needs.

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. For instance, Adriatico's (2023) research on ESL students within a Philippine university showed that referential, probing, and follow-up questions made way for authentic thoughts and encouraged learners to provide well-constructed and elaborate answers. Similarly, Kelly's (2007) findings reported 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 findings align with Walsh's (2006) idea of enhancing learners' classroom interaction through the use of elaborative 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 feedback strategies is also affected by the timing of delivery. 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). However, others found no advantage for immediate feedback (Henderson, 2021; 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.

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.

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. 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 recognizes the existence of these needs in learners, it still regards them as social experiences constructed during interaction.

SSMMD goes a step further by providing a process-based approach of how motivational support works in the classroom. From this perspective, engagement is viewed as a behaviour that students show as a result of the interaction between outside factors and their internal psychological needs (Skinner & Pitzer, 2012). Instructional practices and interpersonal interactions are key contextual factors which might either support or frustrate psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness (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.

Research 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 SDT and the SSMMD 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.

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

1. T: Can you tell us something that you learned from the story? (4) yes group members or anyone?
2. L: don't marry someone because of she is beautiful but the attitude
3. 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.
4. 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.

Interview data suggests that Fafa's beliefs about questioning techniques align with her classroom practice. Her statement that "questions if I want to widen the discussion and encourage them to voice out their ideas" suggests that she deliberately employed open questioning to encourage learners to express and justify their opinions. This reveals 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.

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 2

5. 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?
6. LL: /yes/yes/
7. T: You must derive your sentences from things that you do yourself maybe on a daily basis.
8. L: oh... can we work we work together to do that?
9. T: okay the three of you can work together (Rama)

Extract 3

10. T: So those here picks a sound, describe it for us based on the chart you are looking at. Start
11. L: hey! My heart is jumping
12. T: You will choose any sound you want to from the chart, articulate the sound first then you describe it
13. L1: (comes to the board) Sorry Sir describe in what sense? (laughter)
14. L2: description of vowels
15. 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.

However, the interview data reveal an interesting interplay between the tutors' autonomy beliefs and enacted practices. While both tutors articulate a similar belief that autonomy is triggered best by providing meaningful choice, the degree of choice varies according to their comments. Rama's emphasis on providing "choice, but of course, with limitations" demonstrates her cognizance that choice needs to be balanced with structure. On the other hand, Lama emphasized teacher flexibility, learner self-selection and voluntary participation as key components of autonomy-supportive environments, suggesting his commitment to non-controlling strategies that allow learners the agency to determine their own path to learning.

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.

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.

Extract 4

16. T: We are saying car, large, march. How does the vowel sound in these words look like
17. L: uhm... I...I... cannot describe it, sir.
18. T: Look... no worries you can try, mess up then we will guide you
19. L: it's just like letter 'a' with some dots like a colon
20. 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.
21. 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 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 than 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 5

22. T: Okay, so now Eva, what do you understand by the word tense? What is tense? Yeah,
23. L4: I don't know (laughs)
24. T: just feel free, you know it you have been teaching it. Did you go on to teaching practice?
25. L4: Yes
26. T: Good.
27. L4: but I was not teaching English
28. T: No, feel free. Don't be ashamed... you can say anything you understand by the word tenses or tense?
29. L4: I think tenses refer to the time we do a particular action?
30. 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 strengthens learners' relatedness feelings by signalling concern for their emotional well-being and social identity.

The interview data provide a comparative perspective of how the tutors' pedagogical beliefs shape their competence-supportive practices. Lama's interview response suggests his use of feedback as a motivational tool to reduce learner anxiety, apprehension, and reluctance to participate, which mirror his interactional practice. On the other hand, interview data highlights Sagarr's concern for learners' self-perceptions and his use of feedback as a protective strategy which shields learners from the affective consequences of inadequate or erroneous responses. Together, the interview data 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 6

- 31. 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?
- 32. LL: /yes/yes/
- 33. T: You must derive your sentences from things that you do yourself maybe on a daily basis.
- 34. L: oh... can we work we work together to do that?
- 35. T: okay the three of you can work together. (Rama)

Extract 7

- 36. 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 their forever
- 37. 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?

38. 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, the interview data reveal that the tensions observed in both tutors' autonomy practices are reflected in their beliefs, but in conceptually different ways. For instance, Rama's interview remarks suggest her a conceptualization of autonomy as a means to improve performance rather than an inherent motivational requirement of language classrooms. 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 learners 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.

39. T: ... now can we listen to her please?

40. L: good evening class=

41. T: =I am giving a direction from

42. L: aha... I am giving direction [from]

43. T: [a direction]

44. L: a...a direction=

45. T: =from

46. L: yes... erm...from... Kunkujang Keitaya=

47. T: =from Kunkujang Keitaya to...?

48. L: My...my... friend is coming from

49. 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.

Discussion

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.

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.

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, automation-, 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 SSMD 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.

Conflict of Interest

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