# A Research on How to Motivate Freshmen and Promote Their Autonomy in Learning English in Junior Middle Schools

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**Abstract:** This research intends to examine the potential factors that influence the motivation – intrinsic or extrinsic – of freshmen in junior middle schools, hoping to find some effective strategies to motivate them to learn and promote their autonomy in learning English. Data were collected from 204 students randomly selected from an experimental class by using closed-ended questionnaires. The qualitative results were derived from classroom observations and interviews with five primary school teachers and two junior middle school teachers. The findings provide evidence on the factors that might influence students' motivation; meanwhile, intrinsic motivation and autonomy can be boosted with the full-scale implementation of several effective motivational strategies.

**Keywords:** Factors of affecting motivation; Effective motivational strategies; English learners' autonomy

## 1. Introduction

Most studies report a high correlation between motivation and achievement, and this correlation is taken as evidence that highly motivated students will do well in school. It is accepted by most fields of learning that motivation is essential to succeed and that "unmotivated students just would not learn but a well-motivated student who is badly taught will probably do better than a poorly-motivated student who is well taught."

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Definition of learning motivation

As Henry Douglas Brown once pointed out, a cognitive view of motivation includes factors such as the need for exploration, activity stimulation, new knowledge, and ego enhancement [1]. Marion Williams and Richard Burden suggested that motivation is "a state of cognitive arousal" that provokes a "decision to act" as a result of which there is "sustained intellectual and/or physical effort," so that the person can achieve the previously set goal. They went on to point out that the strength of that motivation will depend on how much value the individual places on the outcome he or she wishes to achieve. Adults may have clearly defined goals or vague ones. Children's goals, on the other hand, are often more amorphous and less easily described, but they can still be very powerful.

### 2.2. Definition of language learning motivation

Gardner suggested that language learning motivation refers to the combination of effort and desire to

achieve the goal of learning a certain language in addition to developing favorable attitudes toward learning that language [2]. The motivation to learn a second language is seen as referring to the extent to which an individual works or strives to learn a certain language because of a desire to do so and the satisfaction experienced through this activity.

## 2.3. Influences or causes of motivation

In general, the source(s) of motivation can be categorized as either extrinsic (outside the person) or intrinsic (internal). Intrinsic sources can be further subcategorized as either body/physical, mind/mental (i.e., cognitive, affective, conative), and transpersonal/spiritual (**Figure 1**) [3].
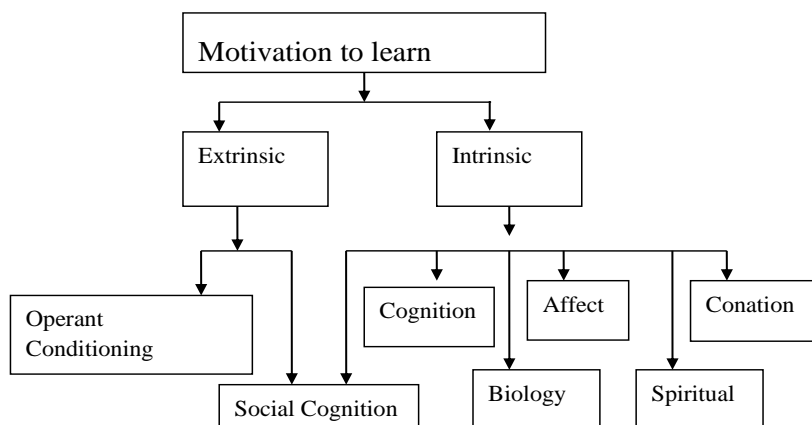


**Figure 1**. Motivation to learn

In current literature, needs are now viewed as dispositions toward action (i.e., they create a condition that is predisposed towards taking action or making a change and moving in a certain direction). Action or overt behavior may be initiated by either positive or negative incentives or a combination of both. The following chart (**Table 1**) provides a brief overview of the different sources of motivation (internal state) that have been studied. While the initiation of action can be traced to each of these domains, it appears that the initiation of behavior may be more likely related to emotions and/or the affective area (optimism versus pessimism, self-esteem, etc.), while persistence may be more related to conation (volition) or goal-orientation.

**Table 1.** Sources of motivational needs

| Sources of motivational needs | |
|---|---|
| Behavioral/external | Elicited by stimulus associated/connected to innately connected stimulus |
| | Obtain desired, pleasant consequences (rewards), or escape/avoid undesired, unpleasant consequences |
| Social | Imitate positive models |
| | Being a part of a group or a valued member |
| Biological | Increase/decrease stimulation (arousal) |
| | Activate senses (taste, touch, smell, etc.) |
| | Decrease hunger, thirst, discomfort, etc. |
| | Maintain homeostasis and balance |

*(Continued on next page)*

| Sources of motivational needs | |
| --- | --- |
| Cognitive | Sustain attention to something interesting or threatening |
| | Develop meaning or understanding |
| | Increase/decrease cognitive disequilibrium; uncertainty |
| | Solve a problem or make a decision |
| | Figure something out |
| | Eliminate threat or risk |
| Affective | Increase/decrease affective dissonance |
| | Increase feeling good |
| | Decrease feeling bad |
| | Increase security or decrease threats to self-esteem |
| | Maintain levels of optimism and enthusiasm |
| Conative | Meet individually developed/selected goals |
| | Achieve personal dreams |
| | Develop or maintain self-efficacy |
| | Take control of one's life |
| | Eliminate threats to meeting goals; achieving dreams |
| | Reduce the control of others on one's life |
| Spiritual | Understand the purpose of one's life |
| | Connect self to ultimate unknowns |

Abraham Maslow attempted to synthesize a large body of research related to human motivation (**Figure 2**) [4].
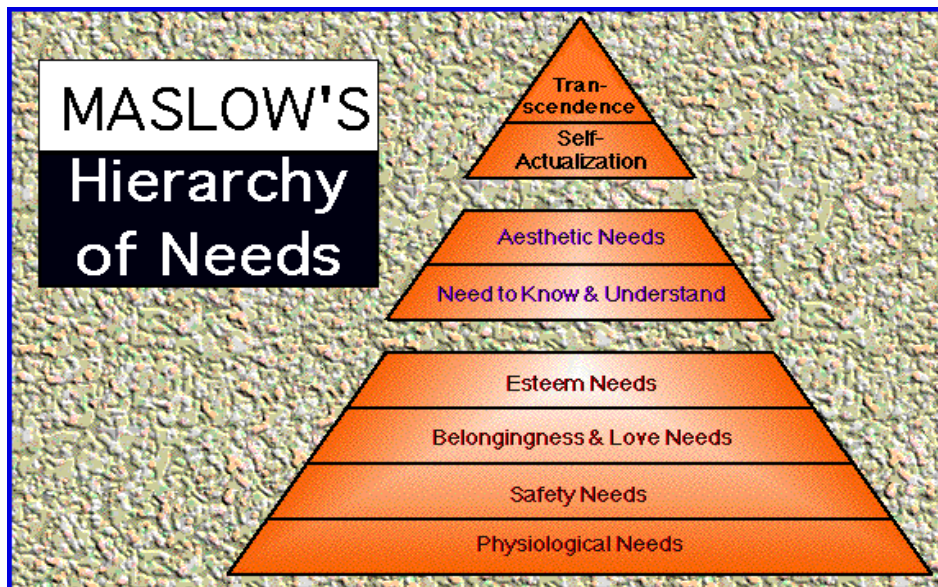


**Figure 2.** Maslow's hierarchy of needs

According to Maslow, an individual is ready to act upon the growth needs if and only if the deficiency needs are met.

Maslow's basic view is that as one becomes more self-actualized and self-transcendent, one becomes wiser (develops wisdom) and automatically knows what to do in various situations.

In 1972, Alderfer developed a comparable hierarchy with his ERG (existence, relatedness, and growth) theory (**Table 2**) [5]. His approach modified Maslow's theory based on the work of Gordon Allport who incorporated concepts from systems theory into his work on personality.

**Table 2.** Alderfer's hierarchy of motivational needs

| Level of need | Definition | Properties |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Growth | Impels a person to make creative or productive effects on himself or herself and the environment | Satisfied through using capabilities in engaging problems; creates a greater sense of wholeness and fullness as a human being |
| Relatedness | Involves relationships with significant others | Satisfied by sharing thoughts and feelings mutually; acceptance, confirmation, understanding, and influence are elements |
| Existence | Includes all the various forms of material and psychological desires | When divided among people, one person's gain is another's loss if resources are limited |

## 2.4. Impacting motivation in the classroom

There are several specific actions that teachers can take to increase motivation in classroom. In general, these fall into the two categories discussed above: intrinsic motivation and extrinsic motivation (**Table 3**).

**Table 3.** Intrinsic motivation and extrinsic motivation

| Intrinsic | Extrinsic |
| --- | --- |
| Explain or show why learning a particular content or skill is important | Provide clear expectations |
| Create and/or maintain curiosity | Give corrective feedback |
| Provide a variety of activities and sensory stimulations | Provide valuable rewards |
| Provide games and simulations | Make rewards available |
| Set goals for learning | |
| Relate learning to students' needs | |
| Help students develop a plan of action | |

As a general rule, teachers need to use as much of the intrinsic suggestions as possible while recognizing that not all students will be motivated by them. Extrinsic suggestions will work, but it must be acknowledged that they do so only as long as the student is under the control of the teacher. When outside of that control, unless the desired goals and behaviors have been internalized, the learner will cease the desired behavior and operate according to his or her internal standards or to other external factors.

## 2.5. Autonomous learning

Many researchers are now beginning to acknowledge Zimmerman's features of regulation (**Figure 3**), which has a clear structure about self-directed learning [6]. This research that leads learners to autonomy is also based on it.

| Levels of Regulation | Features of Regulation | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Sources of Regulation | Sources of Motivation | Task Conditions | Performance Indices |
| 1. Observation | Modeling | Vicarious reinforcement | Presence of models | Discrimination |
| 2. Emulation | Performance and social feedback | Direct/social reinforcement | Correspond to Model's | Stylistic Duplication |
| 3. Self-control | Representation of process standards | Self-reinforcement | Structured | Automatization |
| 4. Self-regulation | Performance Outcomes | Self-efficacy beliefs | Dynamic | Adaptation |

From: "Achieving self-regulation: The trial and triumph of adolescence" by B. J Zimmerman (2003). In F. Pajares & T. Urdan (Eds.), *Academic motivation of adolescents* (vol. 2, pp. 1-27). Greenwich, CT: Information Age. Copyright (2003) by Information Age Press. Reprinted with permission.

**Figure 3.** Features of regulation

## 3. Limitations of previous research

Based on this brief discussion, it has been acknowledged that teachers are able to drive students to learn a language and to sustain their motivation in language learning if they can provide activities that are interrelated between in-class and out-of-class language activities, communicative (game type), integrative (short/small activities form larger activities), pleasant, safe and non-threatening, enthusiastic, group-based, meaningful or relevant, and challenging. These activities help promote self-confidence, experiences of success, learning satisfaction, and good relationships among learners and between teachers and students.

However, a socio-psychological theory of motivation is only as good as its socio-contextual applicability. What motivates one social group may not motivate another. These foreign linguistic studies are concentrated on either the first language classroom or the second language classroom. Chinese linguists and experts mainly focus on the college classroom, paying little attention to middle school English classrooms in China.

## 4. Research design
### 4.1. Research purpose

As far as studies on English junior learners in China are concerned, the problem of stimulating the motivation of freshmen in junior middle schools in learning English always haunts the teachers in middle schools. Compared with other grades, students at this stage are often in a complicated state. They find it difficult to learn English in classrooms as is probably often the case in school language teaching. First, the structure of senior high school entrance examinations, which ultimately determines the institution to which a student gains acceptance. Due to the way these exams are structured, schools and teachers are forced to educate students in a manner that will prove most useful to them. Therefore, the focus of what is taught in secondary school is geared towards sitting such entrance examinations. It has been suggested that having to undertake such exams is the main source of motivation for students to study English. Certainly, a high percentage of students identify English learning as a necessity for achievement in examinations. In addition, school children have no particular contact or interest in foreign culture, nor do their job prospects depend on it. They come from different primary schools and have different levels of English proficiency. Most of them require the constant pressure from teachers. There are often complaints among English teachers that there are not many responses from students during classes. No matter how hard they try, it does not seem to work. Students are often not able to keep up with the teacher. Although they are present in the classroom, their minds are absent, thinking about computer games or other things. Some students often feel that they

have not improved much in English learning since grade one of junior middle school, and they complain about the teaching. Teachers are faced with a range of motivations. Some students have clear goals, fed by strong extrinsic motivations to achieve them. Others have internal intrinsic drive that fires them up. Yet, there are students who may have weak motivation.

There is a proverb that goes, "Well begun is half done." Students' initial motivation (or lack of it) need not stay the same forever. As Alan Rogers once pointed out, "We forget that initial motivation to learn may be weak or die; alternatively it can be increased and directed into new channels [7]."

## 4.2. Research question

Based upon what has been found above, a supplementary research needs to be developed, aiming at finding several effective motivational strategies to improve students' English learning efficiency. To some degree, the purpose of this study is also to stimulate some reflection on teachers' motivational strategies in EFL classroom in China. Therefore, two research questions are raised for this purpose.

(1) What affects freshmen's motivation in learning English?

(2) How to motivate freshmen and promote their autonomy in learning English in junior middle school?

The solutions to these questions were set as the objectives of this research.

## 4.3. Profile of the subjects

The reasons accounting for the first research problem were corroborated through preliminary school classroom observations, interviews, and a questionnaire.

A total of 362 students with an average age of 12 years old were randomly selected from different primary schools, of whom 184 were females and 178 were males. They were enrolled in seven parallel classes by computer. Class 1 to Class 3 were control classes, while Class 4 to Class 7 were experimental classes. Their learning backgrounds varied; some of them were from normal primary schools; the others came from key primary schools. Therefore, their English levels varied a lot. All of them had four English lessons per week. **Table 4** shows the details of the seven classes.

**Table 4.** Profile of the students

| Class | Total | Female | Male | Number of the students from ordinary primary schools | Number of the students from key primary schools |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | 50 | 27 | 23 | 17 | 33 |
| 2 | 50 | 27 | 23 | 16 | 34 |
| 3 | 49 | 27 | 22 | 16 | 33 |
| 4 | 54 | 27 | 27 | 18 | 36 |
| 5 | 54 | 26 | 28 | 18 | 36 |
| 6 | 52 | 24 | 28 | 17 | 35 |
| 7 | 53 | 26 | 27 | 18 | 35 |

The teachers were assigned to teach on average according to their educational level, years of experience, and teaching ability (**Table 5**).

**Table 5.** Profile of four junior middle school teachers

| Name | Class | Sex | Educational level | Years of experience in English teaching |
|------|-------|-----|-------------------|------------------------------------------|
| … | 1 and 2 | Female | College graduate | Eight years |
| … | 3 | Female | College graduate | Six years |
| … | 4 and 5 | Female | College graduate | Eight years |
| … | 6 and 7 | Male | College graduate | Ten years |

Four junior middle school English teachers participated in the qualitative study, of whom two had just finished teaching grade one junior middle school.

## 4.4. Instrument
### 4.4.1. Questionnaire

The quantitative investigation using a questionnaire with 25 close-ended questions was designed according to a revised list of ten guidelines presented by Dornyel and Csizer for motivating learners [8]: (1) set a personal example with your own behavior; (2) create a pleasant, relaxed atmosphere in the classroom; (3) present the task properly; (4) develop a good relationship with learners; (5) increase learners' linguistic self-confidence; (6) make language classes interesting; (7) promote learners' autonomy; (8) personalize the learning process; (9) increase learners' goal awareness; (10) familiarize learners with the target language culture.

In order to help the students understand better, the questionnaire was administered in Chinese, and 213 students in the experimental classes received the questionnaire during their self-study session. The students were requested to mark a number in each slot. The time to complete the questionnaire was limited to 25 minutes, so as to prevent copying among students. From among the 213 students, 11 students did not complete the questionnaire. Therefore, the data of only 202 students were adopted for statistical analysis, in order to analyze the problems of students with different levels of language proficiency. The students were divided into three groups, of which 64 (the original number of students was 69) were students with low language proficiency, 74 (the original number of students was 78) were students with medium language proficiency, and 64 (the original number of students was 65) were students with high language proficiency. The division was based on the scores of the entrance examination and the English teachers' classroom observation. Not knowing that they had been divided into three different levels of learning proficiency, the students were asked to hand in their questionnaires to three different students.

**Table 6.** The entrance examination results of students with different levels of language proficiency

| Students' level | Results of the first test |
|-----------------|---------------------------|
| Students with low language proficiency | 65 |
| Students with medium language proficiency | 81 |
| Students with high language proficiency | 96.5 |

### 4.4.2. Classroom observations and interviews

Qualitative investigation was designed to observe the teaching of five primary school teachers in four different schools (**Table 7**). After the teaching observations, the interviews with the teachers followed. The interviews were carried out individually with no time limit being set, giving a sense of informality and setting a relaxed environment for the teachers, thus guaranteeing the free expression of opinions. This ensures the data collected can truly reflect what the teachers were thinking about.

**Table 7.** Detailed information of the teachers observed and interviewed

| Location of school | Gender | Educational level | Years of experience in English teaching |
|---|---|---|---|
| Key primary school | Male | College graduate | Five years |
| Key primary school | Female | College graduate | Four years |
| Normal primary school | Female | College graduate | Four years |
| Normal primary school | Female | College graduate | Three years |
| Normal primary school | Male | College graduate | Two years |

### 4.5. Data collection

The data from the questionnaire were counted and sorted out with the help of a computer. The interviews were translated from Chinese to English, and subsequently the themes and patterns that emerged were analyzed. The results from the classroom observations, questionnaire, and interviews are summarized and discussed in the next section.

### 4.5.1. Interviews

The primary school teachers listed several problems that could be generalized into the following categories:
(1) the deficiency in teachers' own language competence;
(2) inconsistency of the examination with the teaching;
(3) lack of suitable materials;
(4) difficult to conduct activities in large classes.

### 4.5.2. Questionnaire and classroom observations

The responses to the questionnaire demonstrated that intrinsic motivation, i.e., attitude and self-determination, generally had higher means than extrinsic motivation, i.e., environment, textbooks, and teachers. Items 2 and 3 in the questionnaire ("I could learn English well if…") held the highest scores (mean 4.25 and 4.34, respectively), partly reflecting the self-determination influence on the motivation of students at all levels; item 7 was comparatively lower (mean 2.51), which indicated that students at all levels were not concerned about the relationship with their teachers; the data derived from questions 6 to 12 indicated that some existing problems had affected freshmen's learning motivation during the transition from primary school to middle school; in addition, some extrinsic means scores showed the external impact on students' motivation.

### 4.5.3. Results from the questionnaire, classroom observations, and interviews

The results from the questionnaire, classroom observations, and interviews revealed the factors affecting the intensity of motivation.
(1) Lack of learning goals
(2) Lack of self-confidence
(3) Lack of self-determination
(4) Lack of learning experience
(5) The influences of different teaching goals
(6) Learning contents lack information with information gaps
(7) Lack of supportive learning environment
(8) Problems with teaching approaches
(9) The influence of affective factors
(10) Lack of extracurricular learning activities

(11) Lack of the awareness of English culture
(12) Lack of effective classroom assessment techniques


## 5. Hypothesis on how to motivate freshmen and promote their autonomy in learning English in junior middle school

As confirmed by the findings from the study, teachers may have to go along with students' motivation, or at least be sufficiently aware of their motivation, so that problems can be solved. Teachers may encourage a balanced development of both types of motivation especially for freshmen in middle school. Recognizing learners' instrumental motives can be easily achieved by preparing learners for examinations and focusing more on practical skills, such as how to communicate with other people when traveling abroad. On the other hand, raising their interests towards the target language culture may contribute as well.

According to Gardner [9], attitudes are related to motivation and can be changed. Teachers may raise learners' integrative motivation by enhancing their positive attitudes and correcting their negative stereotypes toward English speaking countries and people as well as the language itself. Rossier proposed a more specific recommendation of providing opportunities for communication to raise learners' integrative motivation [10]. His suggestion was supported by the findings of a study by Gardner, Ginsberg, and Smythe in 1976. Apart from raising the level of integrative motivation, teachers may improve the contents, teaching methods, and classroom activities to stimulate students' interests and motivation in language learning. Both Keller and McNamara suggested that increasing learners' participation is a good way to stimulate their interests in learning which in turn increase motivation [11]. Similar positive findings were found in involving learners, for example, in decision making. Learners who are able to set their own goals and evaluate their own progress were found to be more motivated [12]. Crookes and Schmidt pointed out that motivation is the feeling nurtured primarily by the teacher [13]. Therefore, teachers may be the agent to create a friendly and enthusiastic environment. In addition to good rapport with learners, teachers can raise learners' motivation by enhancing the environment, the contents, and the methods they deliver their lessons. As attitude change is influenced by a number of factors, including the credibility and attractiveness of the presenter, consequences of communication, environment, involvement of learners, as well as the form and content of message [14], teachers should improve these aspects to facilitate better motivation among learners.
Eliciting the purpose and rationale of instruction to learners can also improve their motivation. Nunan put forward several guidelines in the experiential, learning process, and language content domains for teachers to improve learners' motivation [15].

As the causal relationship between integrative motivation and classroom behavior is unclear, encouraging positive classroom behaviors may be another option for teachers to enhance learners' positive attitudes which will in turn increase motivation [16].

Oxford and Ehrman mentioned that teachers must do everything they can to heighten learning motivation by ensuring that the materials and tasks are communicative, non-threatening, exciting, relevant, appropriately challenging, capable of stimulating successful performance, and presented according to students' favored needs to reverse any negative attitudes (e.g., stereotypes) that might influence their motivation [17]. This is the attitude that teachers should develop.

Taking all the aforementioned factors into consideration, several possible solutions have been designed in response to the research question – "How to motivate freshmen to learn English in junior middle school?".
(1) Establish students' dominant position
   (a) Increase learners' goal awareness
   (b) Develop learners' autonomous awareness
   (c) Promote autonomous learning by training
(2) Encourage students to participate in extracurricular activities

(3) Create an agreeable and humanistic classroom language learning environment
   (a) Employ attractive classroom activities
   (b) Match students' situations with the teaching tasks
   (c) Develop teachers' management skills
   (d) Conduct practice-oriented classroom activities
   (e) Create a relaxed environment full of variety and flexibility
   (f) Help students build their self-confidence
(4) Improve learners' metacognitive awareness
(5) Employ more effective classroom assessment techniques
   (a) Provide in-progress evaluation
   (b) Provide a variety of test formats
   (c) Encourage students to assess themselves

This study can be taken as evidence that highly motivated students will do better than others in school. Without doubt, the relationship may be in the opposite direction from that of which is commonly assumed. In other words, it may be achievements that enhance motivation rather than high motivation leading to superior performance. However, upon the enhancement of students' motivation and achievements through the aforementioned motivational strategies employed, they will be eager to develop self-directed learning, which is one of the main objectives of the Chinese National Standards for English in Schools, and then promote the core competence of the English discipline. Therefore, it is the teachers' primary task to promote the learners' autonomy.

Based on what influences the motivation, the hypothesis of effective motivational strategies, and Zimmerman's Features of Regulation, a hypothesis has been put forward to promote learners' autonomy and the core competence of the English discipline (**Figure 4**).
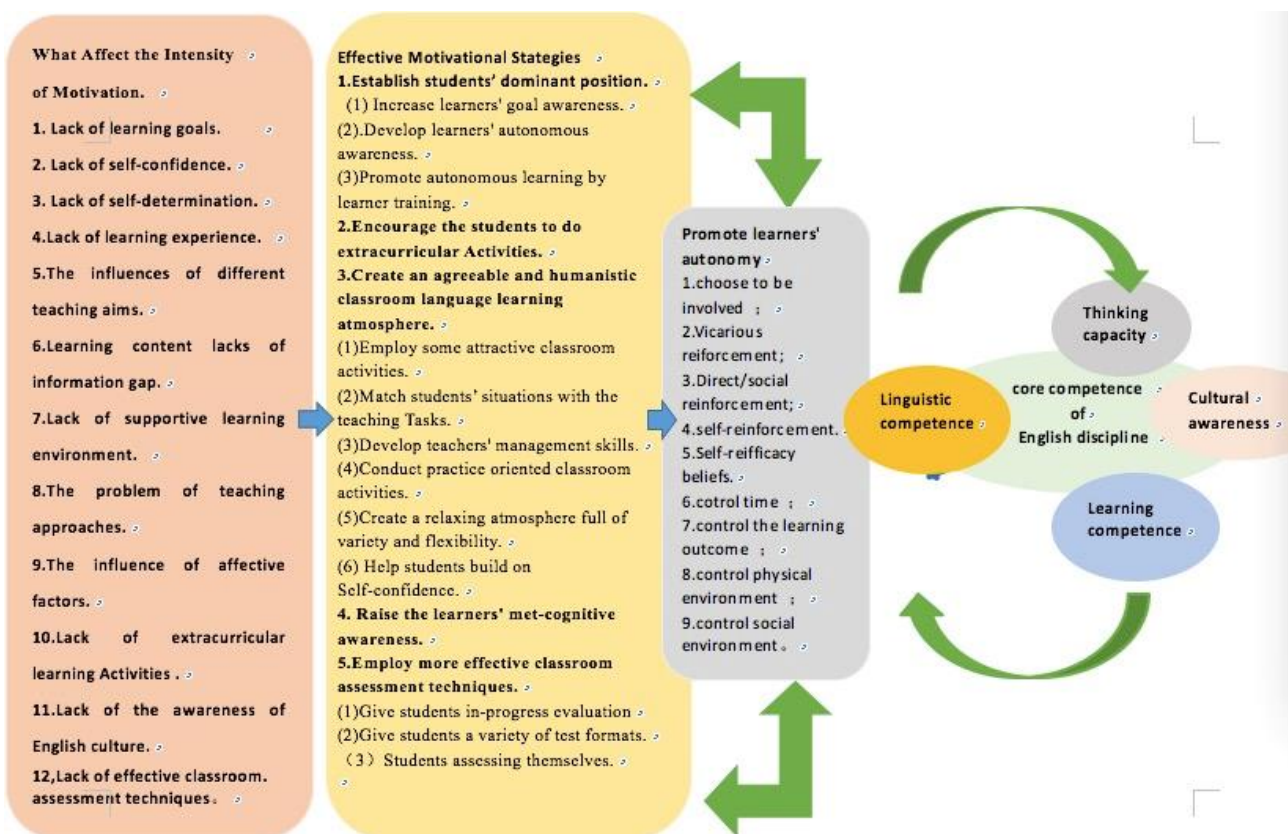


**Figure 4.** Hypothesis of how to promote the learners' autonomy and the core competence of the English discipline.

## 6. Conclusion

Given its obvious importance, the ability to motivate students to learn is a key skill in every teacher's repertoire. While according to Good and Brophy [18], it is pointless even discussing the issue of how to motivate students without prior discussion of the four essential preconditions, without which no motivational strategies can succeed. These include the need for a supportive environment, matching the difficulty level of the material to the ability of the students, proposing objectives that are meaningful to students, as well as having sensitivity and moderation in the use of strategies for motivating students. Overall, the results of the research indicate that there are some problems in freshmen's motivation in learning during the transitional stage from primary school to middle school. Therefore, it is necessary for teachers to guide them at the beginning of this turning point and to find a bridge to connect the two stages.

## Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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