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A Systematic Review of Factors Influencing Young Learners' Motivation to Learn English

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Abstract

This study reviews current empirical studies on young learners' (YLS) motivation to learn English published between 2020 and 2024 in nine countries. We focus on how authors defined motivation, what research design they used, what the main findings are, and what factors influence YLS' motivation. We followed the procedures of systematic reviews recommended by Arksey and O'Malley (2005). First, we screened publications along these inclusion criteria: listed in Scopus-indexed journals Q1 and Q2, published in English between 2020 and 2024, and empirical studies on children's motivation. This study revealed that effective teaching practices, self-regulated learning strategies, collaborative learning, self-accessed extramural activities in English and enjoyment in doing them, personality traits, meaningful, appropriate, and challenging tasks in classes, and good relationships between teachers and YLS were the key factors impacting children's motivation most strongly. These have implications for practice. We argue that children's self-access learning must be developmentally scaffolded and socially supported, and motivation should involve and lead to autonomy. Therefore, children should have access to enjoyable and age-appropriate activities not only in the classroom, but also at home and in digital settings to sustain their motivation.

Keywords: motivation, young learners, EFL, learning, teaching

Understanding the factors influencing young learners' (YLS) motivation to learn English has gained a lot of attention in recent years. As globalization continues to shape educational landscapes, understanding what factors drive YLS' enthusiasm and engagement in language learning has become a key domain. This systematic review analyzes recent empirical studies on key factors shaping YLS' motivation to learn English, drawing on a diverse range of studies conducted over the past five years. It focuses on the definitions of motivation that framed studies, the research design researchers used, and their main findings.

YLS are children between six and 15 years of age (Mihaljević Djigunović & Nikolov, 2019). What motivates this age group differs significantly due to cognitive, emotional, and social developmental factors (Webber et al., 2023). Six-year-olds are often driven by intrinsic

motivation: they enjoy learning through curiosity, play, and immediate experiences (Omrani et al., 2019). In contrast, 15-year-olds blend intrinsic and extrinsic motives, focusing on goals like grades and future aspirations (Webber et al., 2023). Cognitively, young children are motivated by tangible rewards, immediate feedback, and mastery motives, when they find tasks doable, whereas adolescents can engage in abstract thinking and long-term planning (Omrani et al., 2019). Socially, six-year-olds are motivated by cooperative play, while teenagers are influenced by group dynamics, competition, and social status. Additionally, younger learners need more guidance for self-regulation, while adolescents are more independent and goal-oriented (Opdenakker, 2022). Emotional factors also differ, as children respond strongly to both positive and negative experiences, whereas teens can navigate more complex emotions and social pressures better, which can impact their motivation (Omrani et al., 2019).

Nikolov (1999) argued that YLs tend to be motivated to learn additional languages. She claimed that the key factors shaping their motivation were the teacher and intrinsically motivating and cognitively challenging tasks aligned with YLs' age and abilities (Nikolov, 1999). A lot of research has been conducted on children learning English (e.g., Butler, 2015; Liao et al., 2023; Wu & Hung, 2022; Tsai, 2020; Villarreal & Lázaro-Ibarrola, 2022); thus, it is timely to review what factors influence YLs' motivation in learning English. Furthermore, research on self-access learning for young children is limited, but it stresses the teachers' role in preparing them for autonomous learning. With teacher support and clear guidance, YLs can choose suitable materials and take responsibility for their learning (Park, 2015). Scaffolded choice and reflection boost motivation and persistence in self-directed English study (Takahashi, 2015), and autonomy-focused practices develop early metacognitive awareness and independent learning behaviors (Mynard & Carson, 2012). From the perspective of self-determination theory, autonomy-supportive teaching, positive teacher–student relationships, and engaging activities foster intrinsic motivation and self-initiated learning (Reeve, 2009; Reeve & Cheon, 2021). Therefore, the primary EFL classroom is crucial for building learners' confidence, agency, and willingness to use English in and beyond school, and for enabling self-access language learning activities.

This review aims to enhance our understanding of the complex interplay of motivational factors that influence YLs' motivated behavior when learning English. By identifying them, teachers and policymakers can design more effective interventions to create a supportive learning environment. Fostering high levels of motivation is crucial to

supporting language learning, as intrinsically motivated students are more likely to devote more time and effort to mastering the English language.

This review, therefore, aims to answer these questions:

1. How is motivation defined by the authors of the selected studies?
2. What research design did the authors use?
3. What are the main findings of the studies?
4. What factors influence YLs' motivation most strongly?

Method

The procedures of this systematic review were as follows (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005):

1) Clarification of terminology

First, we identified relevant studies using the Scopus database (ScienceDirect) because it includes high-quality, peer-reviewed journals in education and applied linguistics. Keywords for the search included young learner, motivation for YL, English, EFL, and ESL. The authors used Boolean operators (and, or) with a combination of keywords.

2) Inclusion and exclusion criteria

The inclusion criteria were: (1) listed in Scopus-indexed journals, (2) published in English between 2020 and 2024, (3) empirical studies on children's motivation, (4) published in refereed Q1 and Q2 journals, and (5) participants were between six and 15 years old (ISCED 1-2). We excluded: (1) papers not published in Q1 and Q2 journals, (2) articles not in English, (3) overviews, chapters in books, book reviews, and conference proceedings, (4) papers on subjects other than English, and (5) participants who attended pre-school or upper secondary school (ISCED 0 or 3).

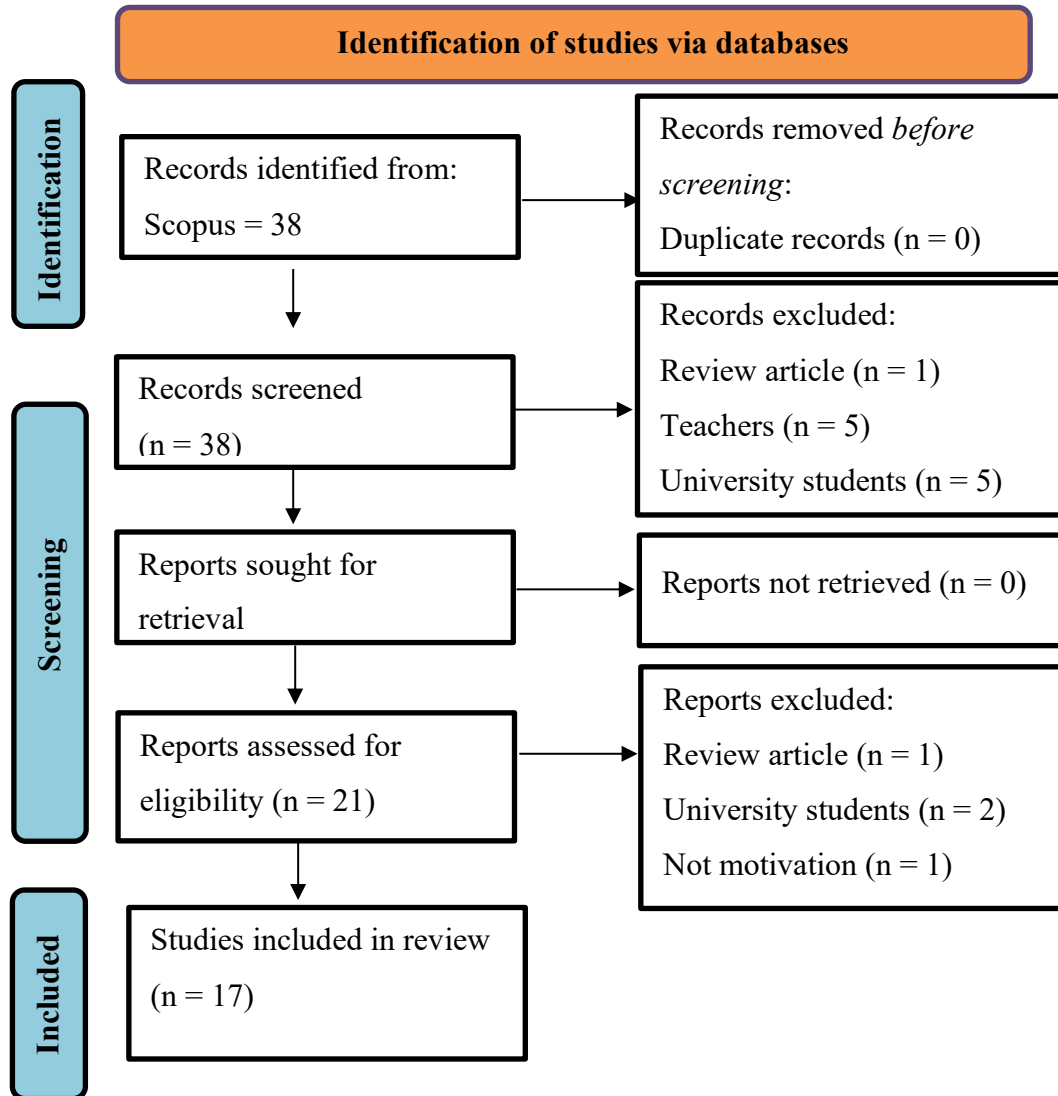
3) Charting and assessing the data by reading the articles one by one.

The data collection process is shown in Figure 1, including identification, screening, and inclusion for this review (Page et al., 2021). The search activity was conducted in April 2024. First, we read the title and abstract of the articles; in the second screening, we read the whole text to ensure that they fit the inclusion criteria. The keyword search resulted in 38 articles. After verifying duplicates, 38 abstracts were assessed using the inclusion and exclusion criteria. Seventeen publications were excluded for these reasons: it was a review article (n = 1), the participants were teachers (n = 5), and university students (n = 5), and the topic was not motivation (n = 6), resulting in 21 full articles for the second screening. These

articles were closely read, after which four were excluded because they were review articles (n = 1), not related to motivation (n = 1), and the participants were university students (n = 2). Finally, the database included 17 papers.

Figure 1

Flow Chart of Literature Search and Article Selection (Adapted from Page et al., 2021)



The two authors read the articles and collaborated to finalize their specifics. Next, we discuss their characteristics to ensure the reliability of data charting. We list key information about each study: authors, year of publication, research design, countries, age, number of participants, and Q-Journal. The summary of selected studies is presented in Table 1.

Table 1*Characteristics of 17 Studies*

Author(s)	Year	Research design	Country	YLS' age	Number of participants	Journal category
Azpilicueta-Martínez & Lázaro-Ibarrola	2023	Quantitative method	Spain	Mean 10.61	895	Q1
Bai & Guo	2021	Quantitative method	Hong Kong	9 - 10	528	Q1
Bai & Wang	2023	Quantitative method	Hong Kong	9 - 13	458	Q1
Fenyvesi	2020	Mixed methods	Denmark	7 - 9	276	Q1
Guo et al.	2023	Quantitative method	Hong Kong	10 - 12	723	Q1
Hennebry-Leung & Xiao	2023	Quantitative method	Hong Kong	11 - 14	277	Q1
Inostroza et al.	2024	Quantitative method	Chile	8 - 11	137	Q2
Kristiawan et al.	2022	Qualitative method	Indonesia	12 - 14	30	Q1
Lázaro-Ibarrola & Azpilicueta-Martínez	2021	Quantitative method	Spain	10 - 12	399	Q1
Lázaro-Ibarrola & Villarreal	2021	Quantitative method	Spain	10 - 11	24	Q2
Leona et al.	2021	Quantitative method	Netherlands	10	298	Q1
Liao et al.	2023	Mixed methods	Taiwan	9 - 10	528	Q1
Roothoof et al.	2022	Mixed methods	Spain	10 - 12	75	Q1
Tsang & Lee	2023	Quantitative method	Hong Kong	Mean 8.95	110	Q1
Villarreal & Lázaro-Ibarrola	2022	Mixed methods	Spain	10 - 11	26	Q1
Vidergor	2021	Quantitative method	Israel	7 - 11	528	Q1
Zhu et al.	2024	Quantitative method	China	8 - 10	270	Q1

4) Collating, summarizing, and reporting the results

Finally, the 17 articles were analysed using content analysis and summarized and reported in a narrative text.

Results

Definition of Motivation

According to the authors of the selected studies, motivation is conceptualized as a driving force for language learning (Fenyvesi, 2020; Inostroza et al., 2024; Lázaro-Ibarrola & Azpilicueta-Martínez, 2021; Lázaro-Ibarrola & Villarreal, 2021; Villarreal & Lázaro-Ibarrola, 2022), and a dynamic and multifaceted construct that affects learners' engagement, behavior, and performance in language learning tasks (Azpilicueta-Martínez & Lázaro-Ibarrola, 2023; Kristiawan et al., 2022; Villarreal & Lázaro-Ibarrola, 2022). Motivation is also defined as willingness to participate in, an interest, and enthusiasm about learning tasks (Guo et al., 2023; Roothoof et al., 2022; Tsang & Lee, 2023; Vidergor, 2021). Motivation is a multifaceted construct including self-efficacy and task values (Bai & Wang, 2023), and self-efficacy, interest, and growth mindset (Bai & Guo, 2021). Furthermore, motivation is a key factor related to the effort YLs make and the success in language learning (Leona et al., 2021). Three authors did not define motivation (Hennebry-Leung & Xiao, 2023; Liao et al., 2023; Zhu et al., 2024).

Research Design and Data Collection Instruments

We classified the research design specified by the authors into three: mixed methods (n = 4), quantitative (n = 12), and qualitative (n = 1). The results are illustrated in Figure 2.

Figure 2

The Research Design Used in 17 Publications

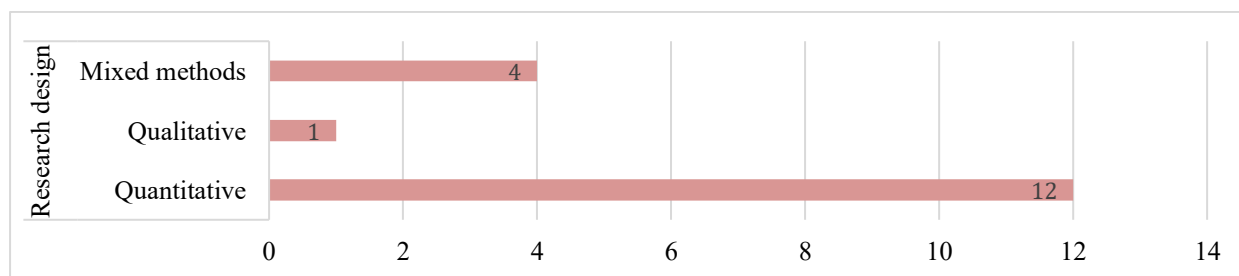
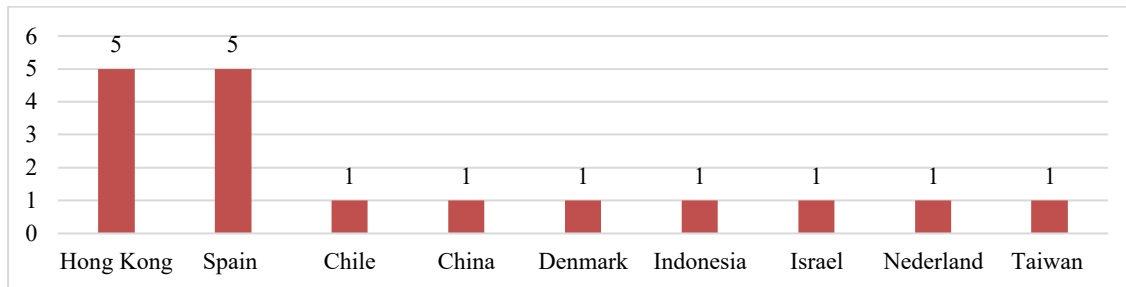


Figure 3 displays the geographical distribution of the 17 articles across nine countries, namely Hong Kong, Spain (n = 5), Chile, China, Denmark, Indonesia, Israel, Nederland, and

Taiwan (n = 1), respectively. The number of YLs who participated in these studies ranged from 24 to 895, whereas their ages ranged between 7 and 14 years.

Figure 3

Contexts of the Selected Studies



The instruments used for collecting data included questionnaires (n = 16), tests (n = 10), interviews (n = 4), observations (n = 2), a reflective journal, and a digital storytelling product (n = 1). They are presented in Table 2.

Table 2

Instruments Used in Selected Studies

Instrument	Studies
Questionnaires (n = 16)	Azpilicueta-Martínez & Lázaro-Ibarrola (2023), Bai & Wang (2023); Bai & Guo (2021); Guo et al. (2023); Hennebry-Leung and Xiao (2023); Inostroza et al., (2024); Lázaro-Ibarrola & Azpilicueta-Martínez (2021); Lázaro-Ibarrola & Villarreal (2021); Leona et al. (2021); Tsang & Lee (2023); Vidergor, (2021); Zhu et al. (2024); Fenyvesi (2020); Liao et al. (2023); Villarreal & Lázaro-Ibarrola (2022); Roothoof et al. (2022)
Tests (n = 10)	Bai & Wang (2023); Bai & Guo (2021); Guo et al. (2023); Lázaro-Ibarrola & Villarreal (2021); Leona et al. (2021); Tsang & Lee (2023); Fenyvesi (2020); Liao et al. (2023); Villarreal & Lázaro-Ibarrola (2022); Roothoof et al. (2022)
Interviews (n = 4)	Tsang & Lee (2023); Kristiawan et al. (2022); Fenyvesi (2020); Liao et al. (2023)
Observations (n = 2)	Kristiawan et al. (2022); Fenyvesi (2020)
Reflective journal (n = 1)	Kristiawan et al. (2022)
Digital storytelling product (n = 1)	Kristiawan et al. (2022)

Main Findings

The main findings of the 17 studies were organized into four groups: (1) comparing CLIL and student' motivation (n=3), (2) YLs' self-regulated learning (SRL) strategies and writing competence (n=3), (3) factors that influenced student' motivation (n=9) and (4) personality and teacher variables, motivation (n=2). Interestingly, some studies used multiple instruments: for example, Kristiawan (2022) collected data with four instruments, and Fenyvesi (2020) with three.

Three studies showed that CLIL had a positive impact on students' motivation: children in more intensive, high-CLIL programs were more motivated than their peers in low-CLIL and non-CLIL classes (Azpilicueta-Martínez & Lázaro-Ibarrola, 2023). CLIL students had higher motivation in two domains (the Ideal L2 Self and the L2 Learning Experience) than non-CLIL participants (Zhu et al., 2024) and more positive attitudes towards English (Lázaro-Ibarrola & Azpilicueta-Martínez, 2021).

Three studies found that self-regulated learning strategies had positive effects on YLs' writing competence. Bai and Wang (2023) revealed that the self-regulated reading-to-write scale (SR-R2W) strategy positively influenced children's writing competence; those who had high levels of self-efficacy used more SR-R2W strategies. Bai and Guo (2021) showed that high-achieving learners had higher motivation and SRL strategy than average students, motivation affected SRL strategy, and learners' competence in writing. Furthermore, Guo et al. (2023) found that grit was the strongest predictor of SRL strategy utilisation, whereas self-efficacy predicted critical thinking and achievement in English.

Nine studies identified factors that influenced YLs' motivation. Kristiawan et al. (2022) showed that digital storytelling boosted students' motivation after ten meetings. Fenyvesi (2020) revealed that YLs were strongly motivated because English is an international language. Leona et al. (2021) claimed that various types of self-accessed extramural English activities directly influenced students' vocabulary, mediated by motivational factors. Liao et al. (2023) showed that the game-based augmented reality (AR) interventions improved students' motivation. Lázaro-Ibarrola and Villarreal (2021) and Villarreal and Lázaro-Ibarrola (2022) documented how pair work and task repetition contributed to high task motivation. Roothoof et al. (2022) revealed that learners' task motivation was high during writing in a task repetition group, but it decreased slightly with direct corrections. Tsang and Lee (2023) revealed that enjoyment had the strongest correlation with speaking motivation and English proficiency. Vidergor (2021) showed that

game experiences influenced students' motivation and collaboration; a digital escape room enhanced collaboration, social experience, and motivation to learn.

Two studies showed how YLs' personality variables and teacher variables impacted motivation and self-efficacy. Hennebry-Leung and Xiao (2023) found that conscientiousness and extraversion showed large effects for motivational orientations. Inostroza et al. (2024) revealed that teachers' profiles including English language teaching training and access to multisensory materials were a major factor in students' motivation and attitude to English learning.

Factors Influencing Young Learners' Motivation Most Strongly

Table 3 presents several factors found to impact children's motivation to learn English in the 17 studies. They were classified into these categories: children's individual differences, contextual factors, environmental influences, pedagogical approaches and methods.

Table 3

Factors Influencing Young Learners' Motivation

Categories	Factors	Authors
YLS' individual differences	Self-efficacy	Bai & Guo, Bai & Wang, Guo et al.
	Growth mindset	Bai & Guo, Guo et al.
	Interest	Bai & Guo
	Positive attitudes towards feedback	
	Intrinsic motivation	Guo et al., Vidergor
	Positive learning experiences	Bai & Wang, Inostroza et al.
	Positive attitudes towards English	Fenyvesi, Lázaro-Ibarrola & Azpilicueta-Martínez
	Grit	Guo et al.
	Gender	Guo et al., Fenyvesi
	Task motivation	Roothoof et al.
	Enjoyment	
	Anxiety	Tsang & Lee
	Boredom	
	Speaking motivation	
	Curiosity about other countries	Inostroza et al., Roothoof et al.
Contextual & environmental factors	Access to educational resources	Tsang & Lee, Inostroza et al., Liao et al.
	The design of learning material	
	Importance of English in future professional life	Lázaro-Ibarrola & Azpilicueta-Martínez
	The instrumental power of English in a globalized world	Fenyvesi, Lázaro-Ibarrola & Azpilicueta-Martínez
	The social environment created through pair work	Villarreal & Lázaro-Ibarrola

Pedagogical approaches & methods	Parents	Fenyvesi
	Watching YouTube videos	
	Teachers	Fenyvesi, Hennebry-Leung & Xiao, Inostroza et al.
	Incorporating local culture into language learning activities	Kristiawan et al.
	Extramural English exposure	Leona et al., Tsang & Lee
	Learning environment	Liao et al.
	Immersion	Vidergor
	Games	Fenyvesi, Vidergor
	CLIL program	Azpilicueta-Martínez & Lázaro-Ibarrola, Lázaro-Ibarrola & Azpilicueta-Martínez, Zhu et al.
	Collaborative group work	Kristiawan et al.
	Project-based learning activities	
	Multimodal teaching	
	Model texts and collaborative writing tasks	Lázaro-Ibarrola & Villarreal, Roothoof et al., Villarreal & Lázaro-Ibarrola
	Augmented-reality, game-based learning	Liao et al.
Task repetition	Lázaro-Ibarrola & Villarreal	

We identified some factors with a significant impact on YLs' motivation in the selected studies. First, the approach and methods used by teachers, such as effective teaching practices engaging students and fostering a positive learning environment, improved motivation (Hennebry-Leung & Xiao, 2023; Inostroza et al., 2024). The use of SRL strategies, such as setting goals and self-monitoring, was shown to positively affect motivation (Bai & Guo, 2021; Bai & Wang, 2023). Collaborative learning experiences, for example, working with peers, improved task motivation (Lázaro-Ibarrola & Villarreal, 2021; Villarreal & Lázaro-Ibarrola, 2022). Enjoyment in learning activities, including playful game-based learning, significantly boosted students' motivation (Tsang & Lee, 2023; Vidergor, 2021).

Different types of self-selected activities involving English outside the classroom were also found to increase children's motivation. These included social networks and social interactions with family members, directly influencing students' motivation (Leona et al., 2021). Individual personality traits, such as grit, were strong predictors of children using self-regulated learning strategies (Guo et al., 2023). Tasks that were perceived as meaningful and appropriately challenging also tended to motivate students effectively (Roothoof et al., 2022). Positive relationships between teachers and students, as well as in peer groups,

improved motivation. Students were more motivated to learn when they felt supported and valued by their teachers and peers (Inostroza et al., 2024).

Discussion

As far as definitions used in the selected studies are concerned, they ranged from motivation as a driving force for language learning (Fenyvesi, 2020; Inostroza et al., 2024; Lázaro-Ibarrola & Azpilicueta-Martínez, 2021) to a dynamic and multifaceted construct that affects learners' engagement, behaviour, and performance in language learning tasks (Azpilicueta-Martínez & Lázaro-Ibarrola, 2023; Kristiawan et al., 2022; Villarreal & Lázaro-Ibarrola, 2022). In our view, "children's language learning motivation concerns their situational and sustained willingness to participate in language-learning activities related to their interests, enjoyment, perceived competence, task characteristics, and support from their teachers, peers, and parents" (Lena & Nikolov, submitted for publication). These definitions are in line with what Mihaljević Djigunović and Nikolov (2019) emphasised in their framework.

Concerning the second research question, twelve empirical studies on YLs' motivation to learn English used quantitative methods (Azpilicueta-Martínez & Lázaro-Ibarrola, 2023; Bai & Guo, 2021; Bai & Wang, 2023; Guo et al., 2023; Hennebry-Leung & Xiao, 2023; Inostroza et al., 2024; Lázaro-Ibarrola & Azpilicueta-Martínez, 2021; Lázaro-Ibarrola & Villarreal, 2021; Leona et al., 2021; Tsang & Lee, 2023; Vidergor, 2021; Zhu et al., 2024). Researchers involved large samples of children to make their findings possible to generalize to other contexts. For example, Azpilicueta-Martínez and Lázaro-Ibarrola (2023) involved 895 YLs, whereas Kanonire et al. (2022) included 979 children. One study used qualitative methods (Kristiawan et al., 2022), and four publications applied mixed methods (Fenyvesi, 2020; Liao et al., 2023; Roothoof et al., 2022; Villarreal & Lázaro-Ibarrola, 2022). Ten studies were conducted in Hong Kong and Spain ($n = 5$), respectively: the others were done in seven other countries.

Questionnaires were used to collect data in 16 studies, ten studies used tests, four used interviews, two used observation, and one study used reflective journals and digital storytelling. The most widely used instruments worldwide are questionnaires for collecting data on YLs' motivation and our findings are aligned with this trend.

In response to the third research question, the review found that SRL strategies positively impacted YLs' writing competence, as was highlighted in studies by Bai and Wang

(2023), Bai and Guo (2021), and Guo et al. (2023). This finding aligns with previous research that has consistently shown that students who actively engage in self-regulation tend to perform better on language tasks (see Pintrich, 2004; Zimmerman, 2002).

Motivation is influenced by individual differences. YLs' self-efficacy influenced motivation (Bai & Guo, 2021; Bai & Wang, 2023; Guo et al., 2023), in line with earlier studies by Pinel and Csizér (2013) and Usher and Pajares (2008). A growth mindset also impacted children's motivation (Bai & Guo, 2021; Guo et al., 2023). Liu (2022) revealed a positive relationship between growth mindset and motivation. Interest was another individual factor related to motivation (Bai & Guo, 2021). As Daskalovska et al. (2012) argued, learners' motivation increases when they find the content and the tasks intrinsically motivating and interesting (Guo et al., 2023; Vidergor, 2021). Additionally, gender (Guo et al., 2023) also interacts with motivation in line with previous studies indicating that boys tended to be more motivated than girls (Mihaljević Djigunović & Nikolov, 2019). In contrast, Carreira's (2011) earlier study showed that girls are more motivated than boys in learning English.

Furthermore, we found that positive attitudes toward English (Fenyvesi, 2020) and enjoyment (Inostroza et al., 2024; Tsang & Lee, 2023) also impact student motivation. Additionally, Wallace and Leong (2020) revealed that most YLs expressed positive attitudes toward learning English and found English interesting and enjoyable to learn.

Access to educational resources and the design of learning materials (Liao et al., 2023) also played a role in YLs' motivation. Tomlinson (2012) argued that the adaptability of materials is important; when teachers can modify materials to fit their specific classroom contexts and learner needs, it increases motivation. Positive experiences with feedback enhanced YLs' motivated behavior (Roothoof et al., 2022), as was argued by Ellis (2009): feedback can help them understand their progress and areas for improvement.

The 17 studies revealed how some contextual and environmental factors shaped motivation. Incorporating local culture into language learning activities and providing opportunities for students to express their identity and cultural experiences also increased children's motivation (Kristiawan et al., 2022). Gay (2018) underscored that when teachers acknowledge and incorporate their pupils' diverse cultural perspectives, it validates their identities and encourages greater participation.

Pedagogical approaches and methods can influence motivation. CLIL programs contribute to how children perceive their learning of English (Azpilicueta-Martínez &

Lázaro-Ibarrola, 2023; Lázaro-Ibarrola & Azpilicueta-Martínez, 2021; Zhu et al., 2024). Previous research showed that CLIL can increase children's motivation (Coyle & Roca de Larios, 2020). Multimodal teaching strategies that incorporate visual, auditory, and kinesthetic elements enhanced students' motivation (Kristiawan et al., 2022). Mayer (2002) underscored that when students receive information through multiple modes, they process it more deeply, which fosters positive attitudes toward the learning process. Lázaro-Ibarrola and Villarreal (2021) argued that task repetition improved students' skills and motivation in learning activities. This supports Ellis' study (2009), which revealed that repeated practice in language tasks can lead to greater fluency and accuracy, contributing to a stronger sense of self-efficacy. The use of model texts also influenced young learner motivation in writing (Lázaro-Ibarrola & Villarreal, 2021; Roothoof et al., 2022; Villarreal & Lázaro-Ibarrola, 2022). Kristiawan et al. (2022) argued that project-based learning activities increased YLs' motivation. This aligns with Shin's (2018) study, which showed that project-based learning had a positive impact. Liao et al. (2023) revealed that game-based learning using augmented reality boosted motivation, in line with Tsai's study (2020), which also found a similar relationship.

Regarding research question four, we found some factors that influenced YLs' motivation most strongly. First, effective teaching practices that engage students and foster a positive learning environment enhance motivation (Hennebry-Leung and Xiao, 2023; Inostroza et al., 2024). From a self-access learning perspective, a key to YLs' motivation to use their English for their own purposes, concerns their access to autonomous activities beyond their English classes. Supportive parental practices, positive teacher–student and peer relationships can lead to engaging extramural activities, which in turn build confidence and independence in using English. This way, classroom instruction can serve as a gateway to self-access learning. This aligns with self-determination theory, which shows that autonomy-supportive teaching, positive teacher–student relationships, and engaging activities foster intrinsic motivation and self-directed learning (Reeve, 2009; Reeve & Cheon, 2021).

Second, the use of SRL strategies, such as goal setting and self-monitoring, has been shown to positively affect motivation (Bai & Guo, 2021; Bai & Wang, 2023). Research has indicated that, in light of this relationship, the cognitive support and assessment provided by EFL teachers may hold considerable potential for improving students' goal setting and planning both within and outside cooperative learning contexts (Bai et al., 2026). Because YLs' autonomy is still developing, the link between grit and self-regulated learning shows

that motivation drives their use of self-access resources. This highlights the need for scaffolded self-access learning with strategy instruction and structured guidance that gradually fosters independence (Reeve, 2009; Reeve & Cheon, 2021).

Third, collaborative learning, such as working with peers, improved task motivation (Lázaro-Ibarrola & Villarreal, 2021; Villarreal & Lázaro-Ibarrola, 2022), supporting findings that collaborative learning and interaction enhanced students' motivation in writing tasks (Azkarai & Kopinska, 2020; Lan et al., 2015; Villarreal & Lázaro-Ibarrola, 2022). Next, the enjoyment of learning activities, such as game-based learning, significantly boosted YLs' motivation (Tsang & Lee, 2023; Vidergor, 2021). This aligns with a previous study that claimed that enjoyment influences YLs' intrinsic motivation (Carreira, 2011).

Enjoyment, meaningful tasks, and collaborative learning experiences have direct implications for self-access learning, as game-based and appropriately challenging activities encouraged further voluntary and autonomous engagement with English. Different types of extramural English activities, such as the use of online media and social interactions, directly influenced students' motivation (Leona et al., 2021) and supported sustained out-of-class learning. Sylvén and Sundqvist (2012) argued that spare-time activities are typically self-selected, and they often lead to a high level of motivation to perform well in them. These findings highlight the importance of designing self-access environments that integrate enjoyable, socially embedded, and meaningful opportunities for English use based on the children's own interests.

Individual personality traits, such as grit, were strong predictors of the utilization of SRL strategies (Guo et al., 2023). Liu (2022) found a positive relationship between grit and motivation. Tasks that are perceived as meaningful and appropriately challenging tend to motivate students more effectively (Roothoof et al., 2022). It is in line with the studies reviewed by Mihaljević Djigunović and Nikolov (2019) and Nikolov's (2016), arguing that the tasks for YLs should be considered at the level of difficulty because if the task is too difficult, too easy, or boring, YLs can be demotivated. Positive relationships between teachers and students also enhance motivation (Nikolov, 1999). When students feel supported and valued by their teachers, they are more likely to be motivated to learn (Inostroza et al., 2024).

Conclusion and Implications

Based on the review, we define children's language learning motivation as their situational and sustained willingness to participate in language-learning activities related to their interests, enjoyment, perceived competence, task characteristics, and support from their teachers, peers, and parents (Lena & Nikolov, submitted for publication). The systematic review has found factors impacting YLs' motivation: these include age-appropriate approaches and methods used by teachers, children's self-regulated learning strategies, collaborative and game-based learning, exposure to and self-selected activities using English outside the classroom, grit, meaningful and appropriately challenging tasks, and positive relationships between teachers and YLs and among peers.

Based on the findings, teachers can integrate some tasks into their teaching practices, such as digital storytelling, game-based learning, and CLIL approaches, because they can significantly boost students' motivation. Teachers can teach students how to self-regulate their learning to help them take ownership of their learning. They should create a positive and supportive classroom atmosphere, encourage peer collaboration, and focus on enjoyment and engagement.

This study revealed a complex interplay of individual, contextual, and pedagogical elements with implications for practice. As teachers and researchers continue to explore these dynamics, it is important to identify the complexity of motivation and to employ strategies that fit YLs' various needs. By doing so, teachers can generate engaging and effective language learning experiences that not only boost motivation but also impact the success of YLs becoming autonomous users and learners of English.

The implications also concern how teachers, parents, and peers can shape YLs' engagement with extramural English activities. Children's self-access learning needs to be developmentally scaffolded and socially supported as they develop towards full autonomy. Classroom practices that foster enjoyment, meaningful and appropriately challenging tasks, collaboration, and self-regulated learning strategies encourage learners to use English in self-access and out-of-class contexts. Effective self-access support should provide easily accessible, enjoyable, socially embedded resources across classroom, home, and digital settings to sustain motivation beyond formal instruction.

Limitations and future research

This systematic review has some limitations: we included publications in English published over the past five years in Q1 and Q2 refereed journals. Therefore, some studies published in edited volumes and less prestigious journals or in other languages were not included. For the larger picture, a longer period and other languages should also be included.

Notes on the Contributors

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