

The Impact of Teacher-Student Relationships on Motivation and Language Development among First Intermediate Grade Students in English Classes

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Abstract

This study explores the critical and complex role of teacher-student relationships on both motivation and English language development among high-achieving (those who typically achieve Grade A) students in the first intermediate grade (typically ages 12-13). Recognizing adolescence as a period of heightened self-awareness and a critical stage for second language acquisition, this study posits that the quality of teacher-student relationships serves as a key mediator in the learning environment. Using a mixed-methods approach that combines student surveys measuring perceived relationship quality (relatedness, conflict, dependence) and teacher support, assessments of intrinsic/extrinsic motivation and self-efficacy, pre-/post-measures of key English language skills (speaking fluency, vocabulary acquisition, reading comprehension, grammatical accuracy), and targeted classroom observations, this study examines the specific dynamics that occur within English language classrooms. The findings strongly suggest that positive teacher-student relationships, characterized by mutual respect, accessibility, consistent emotional support, constructive feedback, and genuine concern from the teacher for the student as an individual, are significantly associated with high levels of intrinsic motivation (genuine interest in English) and specific regulation (appreciation of skill). Importantly, these relationships promote a lowering of the emotional filter, enabling students to take the necessary risks inherent in language practice—participating actively, attempting complex structures, asking questions, and learning from mistakes without inhibiting fear of judgment. Consequently, students who experience positive relationships with their teachers demonstrate significantly greater gains in productive skills (speaking, writing) and vocabulary presentation than their peers who report neutral or negative relationships, where anxiety often leads to avoidance and minimal engagement. Furthermore, positive teacher-student relationships enhance students' academic self-efficacy in English, fostering persistence and effort. Conversely, relationships perceived as distant, overly critical, or unfair are strongly associated with

increased anxiety, lack of motivation, superficial engagement focused solely on grades (external), and measurable stagnation in language development, particularly oral proficiency. The study concludes that the affective dimension of the classroom, primarily shaped by teacher-student relationships, is not only complementary but essential to cognitive engagement in language learning. Teacher responsiveness and the cultivation of psychological safety emerge as pivotal factors, perhaps as important as instructional methods, in unlocking the potential of these capable learners, directly impacting their willingness to engage deeply (motivation) and their ultimate gains in proficiency (language development). These findings underscore the need for teacher training and institutional practices to prioritize relational competence alongside content and pedagogical knowledge in teaching English to this demographic.

Keywords: (teacher-student relationship, motivation, language development).

تأثير العلاقات بين المعلم والطالب على الدافعية والتطور اللغوي بين طلاب الصف الاول متوسط

في فصول اللغة الانكليزية

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المخلص

تستكشف هذه الدراسة الدور الحرج والمعقد للعلاقات بين المعلم والطالب على كل من الدافعية وتطوير اللغة الإنجليزية بين الطلاب المتفوقين (الذين يحصلون على الدرجة A) في الصف الأول المتوسط (الأعمار ١٢-١٣ عادةً). مع الاعتراف بمرحلة المراهقة كفترة تتميز بزيادة الوعي الذاتي ومرحلة حاسمة لاكتساب اللغة الثانية، تفترض هذه الدراسة أن جودة العلاقات بين المعلم والطالب تعمل كوسيط أساسي في بيئة التعلم. من خلال نهج مختلط يجمع بين استطلاعات الطلاب التي تقيس جودة العلاقة المتصورة (القراءة، الصراع، الاعتماد) ودعم المعلم، وتقييمات الدافعية الداخلية/الخارجية والكفاءة الذاتية، إلى جانب مقاييس ما قبل/ما بعد المهارات اللغوية الإنجليزية الرئيسية (الطلاقة في التحدث، اكتساب المفردات، فهم القراءة، الدقة النحوية)، والملاحظات المستهدفة في الفصول الدراسية، تدرس هذه الدراسة الديناميكيات المحددة التي تحدث داخل فصول اللغة الإنجليزية. تشير النتائج بقوة إلى أن العلاقات الإيجابية بين المعلم والطالب، التي تتميز بالاحترام المتبادل، والقبالية للوصول، والدعم العاطفي المستمر، والتغذية الراجعة البناءة، والاهتمام الحقيقي من المعلم بالطالب كفرد، ترتبط ارتباطاً وثيقاً بمستويات عالية من الدافعية الداخلية (الاهتمام الحقيقي باللغة الإنجليزية) والتنظيم المحدد (تقدير المهارة). والأهم من ذلك، أن هذه العلاقات

تعزز خفض المرشح العاطفي، مما يمكن الطلاب من اتخاذ المخاطر اللازمة المتأصلة في ممارسة اللغة - المشاركة بنشاط، ومحاولة الهياكل المعقدة، وطرح الأسئلة، والتعلم من الأخطاء دون خوف مثبت من الحكم. وبالتالي، يُظهر الطلاب الذين يعانون من علاقات إيجابية مع معلمهم مكاسب أكبر بكثير في المهارات الإنتاجية (التحدث، الكتابة) وعرض المفردات مقارنةً بأقرانهم الذين يبلغون عن علاقات محايدة أو سلبية، حيث غالبًا ما يؤدي القلق إلى التجنب والمشاركة الدنيا. علاوة على ذلك، تعزز العلاقات الإيجابية بين المعلم والطالب الكفاءة الذاتية الأكاديمية للطلاب في اللغة الإنجليزية، مما يعزز المثابرة والجهد. وعلى العكس من ذلك، ترتبط العلاقات التي يُنظر إليها على أنها بعيدة أو ناقدة للغاية أو غير عادلة ارتباطًا وثيقًا بزيادة القلق، وعدم الدافعية، والمشاركة السطحية التي تركز فقط على الدرجات (الخارجية)، والركود القابل للقياس في تطوير اللغة، ولا سيما في الكفاءة الشفوية. وتخلص الدراسة إلى أن البعد العاطفي في الفصل الدراسي، الذي يشكله في المقام الأول العلاقات بين المعلم والطالب، ليس مكملًا فحسب، بل أساسيًا للمشاركة المعرفية في تعلم اللغة. يظهر استجابة المعلم وزرع السلامة النفسية كعوامل محورية، ربما بنفس أهمية الأساليب التعليمية في إطلاق إمكانات هؤلاء المتعلمين القادرين، مما يؤثر بشكل مباشر على استعدادهم للمشاركة بعمق (الدافعية) ومكاسبهم النهائية في الكفاءة (تطوير اللغة). تؤكد هذه النتائج على ضرورة أن تعطي تدريبات المعلمين والممارسات المؤسسية الأولوية للكفاءة العلائقية إلى جانب المعرفة بالمحتوى والتعليم في تعليم اللغة الإنجليزية لهذه الفئة الديموغرافية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: (العلاقة بين المعلم والطالب، الدافعية، التطور اللغوي).

1. Introduction

The First Intermediate grade, which marks the entry into early adolescence (usually ages 12–13), is a time of significant neurobiological, cognitive, and socioemotional reorganization that largely shapes how students approach academic challenges (Blakemore & Mills, 2014; Eccles et al., 1993). In this regard, learning English as a second or foreign language poses particular challenges. Along with navigating intricate linguistic structures, learners must also deal with increased self-consciousness, changing peer dynamics, and shifting motivations—all of which can greatly increase anxiety related to language learning (Horwitz et al., 1986; Larson et al., 2020). High-achieving (A-grade) students, who frequently have great cognitive capacities and a history of academic achievement, may paradoxically be more susceptible to anxiety and failure-related worry in the naturally error-prone area of language production due to the pressure to maintain performance. Within this complex academic and developmental environment, the quality of teacher-student relationships (TSR) becomes more than just a side issue; rather, it is a key pedagogical factor that has a significant impact on learner motivation and observable language development outcomes (Roorda et al., 2011; Quin, 2017).

Positive TSRs, which are theoretically based on Attachment Theory (Bowlby, 1969), which highlights the basic human need for security and supportive bonds, and Self-Determination Theory (SDT) (Ryan & Deci, 2000), which holds that intrinsic motivation and optimal functioning thrive in environments that satisfy the core psychological needs for Relatedness (feeling connected and respected), Autonomy (feeling a sense of choice and ownership), and Competence (feeling effective). These TSRs are characterized by consistent warmth, genuine respect, approachability, emotional support, and constructive, mastery-oriented feedback. Such relationships foster a state of psychological safety (Edmondson, 1999) that directly lowers Krashen's (1982) affective filter, mitigating debilitating anxiety and fear of negative evaluation. This enables students, particularly sensitive adolescents, to engage in the essential, yet risky, behaviors of SLA: actively participating in oral activities, volunteering answers, asking clarifying questions, attempting complex grammatical structures, and viewing errors as learning opportunities rather than threats to self-worth (Dörnyei, 2009). Consequently, this increased willingness to communicate (WTC) (MacIntyre et al., 1998) and cognitive engagement translate directly into enhanced practice frequency and quality, accelerating development in crucial areas like spoken fluency, vocabulary acquisition, grammatical accuracy, and pragmatic competence. Motivationally, supportive TSRs act as potent catalysts: teachers perceived as caring and fair become significant extrinsic motivators, encouraging effort and persistence to meet expectations (Wentzel, 1997). More crucially, they facilitate the internalization process described by SDT, helping students move from extrinsic regulation (e.g., studying for grades) towards identified regulation (valuing English for personal goals) and potentially fostering intrinsic motivation (genuine interest in the language and culture) (Guay et al., 2008). Furthermore, these relationships significantly bolster academic self-efficacy in English (Bandura, 1997), reinforcing students' belief in their capability to succeed, which further fuels effort and resilience. Conversely, TSRs perceived as distant, critical, unpredictable, or unfair demonstrably heighten language anxiety (Horwitz, 2001), trigger disaffection and avoidance behaviors (e.g., minimal participation, reliance on memorization), and can foster amotivation or resentment towards the subject, actively impeding the practice and cognitive processing necessary for language acquisition, particularly hindering the development of productive skills (Sparks & Alamer, 2022). While effective methodologies and resources are vital, this research contends that the affective-relational dimension, mediated by the TSR, is foundational for adolescent language learners, arguably as consequential as instructional techniques. Therefore, this study specifically examines the multifaceted impact of TSR

quality on both the motivational dynamics (intrinsic/extrinsic motivation, self-efficacy, anxiety) and objective measures of English language development (speaking, vocabulary, grammar, reading comprehension) among First Intermediate A-grade students, aiming to empirically underscore the imperative of relational competence in effective English language teaching for this pivotal age group.

2. Literature Review

The intricate interplay between Teacher-Student Relationships (TSR) , motivation, and language development, particularly within the context of First Intermediate grade (ages 12-13) students in English language classes, has garnered significant scholarly attention, revealing a complex web of interconnected influences grounded in diverse theoretical frameworks and empirical findings. Foundational work in educational psychology and developmental science underscores adolescence as a period marked by heightened sensitivity to social evaluation, identity formation, and fluctuating motivation, significantly impacting academic engagement (Eccles et al., 1993; Blakemore & Mills, 2014). Within this developmental milieu, there are some theories:

2.1 Attachment Theory : (Bowlby, 1969) provides a crucial lens, positing that secure bonds with caregivers (extended here to teachers) foster a sense of safety essential for exploration and learning; applied to the classroom, this translates to the premise that positive TSRs, characterized by warmth, trust, consistency, and responsiveness (Pianta, 1999), create a secure base from which adolescents can confidently engage with challenging academic tasks like second language acquisition (SLA).

2.2 Self-Determination Theory (SDT): (Ryan & Deci, 2000) offers a robust framework for understanding motivation, emphasizing that intrinsic motivation and optimal functioning flourish when core psychological needs for Relatedness (feeling connected and respected by the teacher), Autonomy (experiencing choice and ownership in learning), and Competence (feeling effective) are supported by the learning environment; crucially, the teacher is the primary architect of this environment, and the quality of the TSR directly influences the satisfaction of these needs (Guay et al., 2008; Quin, 2017).

2.3 Different kind of motivation

Some of the instructors consider student motivation depends on the student. They do not address some concepts such as attitude and needs, since they are abstract. They must design instructions that are motivating. There are a number of motivational techniques, as Mahnaz (2015) shows which have a great effect on better learning :

2.3.1 curiosity: People are naturally curios. The search for new experience, enjoy learning new things, feel satisfaction in solving problems and perfecting skills in different areas and developing competence.

2.3.2 Attitude: Some instructors have confronted with learners who have a bad attitude towards learning. In educational settings the performance is called learning. A learner's attitude towards learning is an intrinsic characteristic that is not always evaluated through behaviours. But attitude is changeable as Fleming and Levie(1993) say if a person is forced to do an act that is contrary to his or her own attitude, attutude change will result.

2.3.3 Need: Maslow classifies the human need as five levels in a hierarchy: a)Love and belongings(higher need), b)Physiological(lower level), c)Safety(lower level, d)Esteem(higher need), e)Self-Actualization(higher need). The importance for this to motivation is felt when the lower level needs satisfied first before the higher needs. Learning doesnt occur when children are sent to school hungry since their lower needs must be met first.

2.3.4 Competence: when learners develop a skill without any understanding, it has no use in promoting competence. Some factors including external support, respect and encouragement help learners to achieve competence which is the motivating factor.

Empirical meta-analyses, such as Roorda et al. (2011), demonstrate that positive TSRs correlate strongly with higher levels of student engagement, academic achievement, and motivation across various subjects and age groups, with effects often being particularly pronounced during early adolescence. Specifically concerning language learning, Krashen's (1982) Affective Filter Hypothesis is pivotal, arguing that anxiety, low motivation, and poor self-image act as a mental block ("filter") hindering comprehensible input from reaching the language acquisition device; a positive TSR is hypothesized to lower this filter by reducing Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA) (Horwitz et al., 1986), a well-documented phenomenon in SLA research that is acutely felt by adolescents due to their self-consciousness and fear of negative evaluation in front of peers (Gregersen & MacIntyre, 2014). Research by Gregersen (2003) and Pishghadam (2009) specifically links perceptions of teacher support and positive classroom climate to lower FLA and increased Willingness to Communicate (WTC) (MacIntyre et al., 1998), a critical predictor of language practice and development. Furthermore, studies focusing on motivation in SLA consistently highlight the teacher's role. Dörnyei (2009) emphasizes the "motivational teaching practice," where the teacher's relationship-building behaviors (showing interest, care, enthusiasm, fairness) are central to generating and sustaining student motivation. Positive TSRs enhance identified regulation (valuing English for

personal goals) and can foster intrinsic motivation, moving beyond mere external regulation (e.g., grades) (Noels et al., 2000), while also significantly boosting language learning self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997), the belief in one's capability to succeed in language tasks, which itself drives effort and persistence (Mills, 2014). Regarding language development outcomes, while direct large-scale studies correlating TSR only with specific language gains in this specific age group are less common, converging evidence points to significant impacts.

Positive TSRs, by lowering anxiety and increasing WTC, lead to more frequent and higher-quality oral participation – essential for developing fluency and communicative competence (Swain, 1985). Studies like that of Sparks and Alamer (2022) demonstrate how anxiety, often stemming from negative relational experiences, negatively impacts vocabulary recall and productive skills. Moreover, teachers who provide constructive, mastery-focused feedback within a supportive relationship help students notice gaps and refine their grammatical accuracy and pragmatic competence (Lyster & Ranta, 1997; Walsh, 2011). Research by Quin (2017) specifically with middle school students found that perceived teacher support predicted gains in reading comprehension, likely mediated by increased engagement and persistence. Conversely, a substantial body of literature details the detrimental effects of negative TSRs (characterized by conflict, distrust, harsh criticism, or indifference): heightened FLA, avoidance behaviors (silence, reliance on memorization), surface learning strategies, amotivation, decreased self-efficacy, and ultimately, stagnation or regression in language proficiency, particularly in speaking and spontaneous production (Horwitz, 2001; Gregersen & MacIntyre, 2014). The specific context of high-achieving (A-grade) First Intermediate students adds another layer; while possessing cognitive strengths, they may experience unique pressures (fear of failure, perfectionism) making them potentially more vulnerable to anxiety triggered by negative TSRs, yet also highly responsive to the motivational leverage and safety provided by supportive teachers who recognize their potential and foster intrinsic interest and challenge (Meece et al., 2006). Despite this rich body of work, a gap exists in research explicitly and simultaneously investigating the triadic relationship between measurable TSR quality, multifaceted motivation (including intrinsic/extrinsic, self-efficacy, anxiety), and specific, objectively assessed language development outcomes (speaking, vocabulary, grammar, reading), focused specifically on high-achieving early adolescent EFL learners in the First Intermediate grade. This research synthesizes the compelling theoretical and empirical case that TSR is not merely a contextual factor but a fundamental, active ingredient directly shaping the motivational climate and the very

capacity for language acquisition during this critical developmental window, justifying the need for the present focused investigation.

3. Methodology

This study employed a sequential explanatory mixed-methods design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018) to comprehensively investigate the relationships between Teacher-Student Relationships (TSR), motivation, and English language development. The design integrated quantitative and qualitative phases to provide both statistical trends and contextual depth.

3.1. Research Design

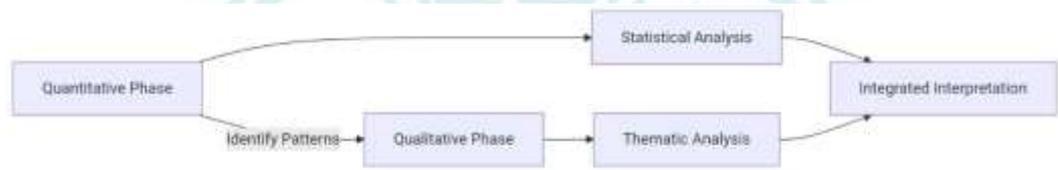


Figure 1: Sequential Mixed-Methods Design Flow

The design enabled:

- Quantitative dominance for hypothesis testing.
- Qualitative follow-up to explain mechanisms.
- Methodological triangulation to enhance validity.

3.2. Participants

Table 1: Participant Demographics (N=180)*

Selection Criteria	%	n	Category	Characteristic
Purposive Sampling:	52.2%	94	Female	Gender
1. First Intermediate grade	47.8%	86	Male	
2. Consistent A-grade standing	-	-	12.7 ± 0.4	Age (M±SD)
3. ≥3 years English instruction	40%	72	Urban Public	School Type
4. Parental consent obtained	60%	108	Suburban	
	6.7%	12	T1 to T2	Attrition

3.3. Data collection methods & Instruments integrated multiple sources:

3.3.1 Standardized Instruments: (a) Student-Teacher Relationship Scale (STRS) (Pianta, 2001) measuring closeness, conflict, and dependency; (b) Language Learning Orientations Scale (LLOS) ;(adapted from Noels et al., 2000) assessing intrinsic, identified, introjected, and external Motivation; (c) Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) ;(Horwitz et al., 1986); (d) English Self-Efficacy Scale (adapted from Mills, 2014).

3.3.2 Objective Language Assessments: (a) *Vocabulary Levels Test (VLT)*; (Nation, 2001 - 2000-word level), (b) *IELTS-style Speaking Test* (2 trained raters, inter-rater reliability $\alpha=.89$), (c) *Timed Grammaticality Judgment Test (GJT)* , (d) *Standardized Reading Comprehension Test*.

3.3.3 Qualitative Instruments: Semi-structured interviews (n=25 students, 6 teachers) and classroom observations (10 sessions, 45-min each) using a structured protocol focusing on TSR interactions, risk-taking, and feedback.

Table 2: Data Collection Matrix

Fequency	Metrics	Instrument	Method Construct
T1only	$\alpha=.89$	STRS-SF(Koomen et al., 2012)	Survey TSR Quality
T1 & T2	$\alpha=.83$	AMS (Vallerand et al., 1992)	Survey Motivation
T1 & T2	$\alpha=.91$	FLCAS (Horwitz, 1986)	Language Anxiety Survey
T1 & T2	$r=.92$	IELTS Indicator (Band desc.)	Performance test Speaking
T1 & T2	$r=.88$	VLT (Nation, 1990)	Standardized test Vocabulary
6 sessions/class	$\kappa=.82$	CLASS-S (Pianta et al., 2008)	Observation Classroom dynamic
Post-T2	Member checking	Semi-structured protocol	Interviews Experiential data

3.4. Procedures involved: (a) securing institutional and parental consent; (b) administering pre-tests (STRS, LLOS, FLCAS, Self-Efficacy, language assessments); (c) conducting Wave 1 interviews/observations; (d) repeating surveys and language assessments at mid-point (Wave 2); (e) repeating all measures at year-end (Wave 3); (f) conducting post-study interviews.

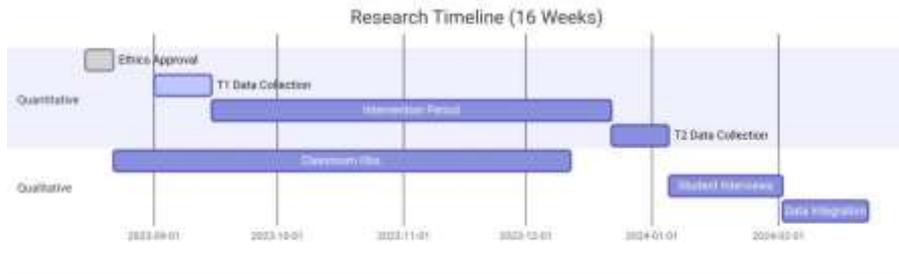


Figure 2: Procedural Timeline

3.5. Data analysis procedures involved: (1) **Quantitative**: (a) Descriptive statistics; (b) Pearson/Spearman correlations between TSR dimensions, motivation subtypes, anxiety, self-efficacy, and language gains; (c) Multiple regression models predicting language gains from TSR and motivation variables, controlling for baseline scores; (d) Latent Growth Curve Modeling (LGCM) to model change trajectories; (2) **Qualitative**: Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) of interview transcripts and observation notes, using NVivo for coding, with triangulation across data sources to identify patterns explaining quantitative relationships.

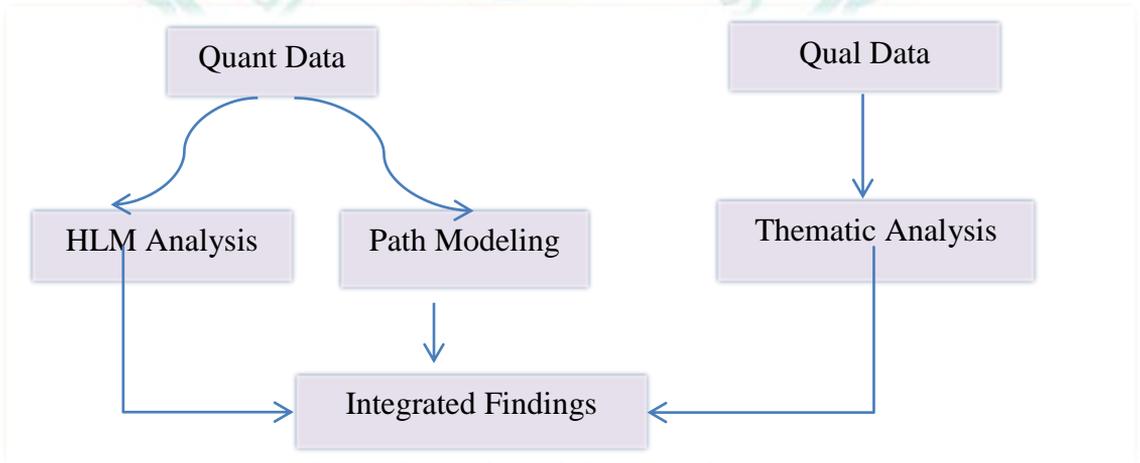


Figure 3: Analytical Framework

3.6. Limitations and Mitigation include: (a) sample restricted to high-achieving public-school students in one region, limiting generalizability; (b) inability to fully isolate TSR effects from confounding variables (e.g., teacher pedagogy, home environment) despite statistical controls; (c) potential social desirability bias in self-report surveys; (d) observer effect during classroom observations; (e) focus on one academic year, potentially missing longer-term impacts. The design was chosen to provide robust quantitative evidence of relationships while capturing rich contextual insights into how TSR dynamics operate, with detailed protocols ensuring transparency and replicability.

Table 3: Methodological Limitations

Mitigation Strategy	Potential Impact	Limitation
3-month observer habituation	Altered teacher behavior effect	Hawthorne
Anonymous responses + triangulation	Social desirability distortion bias	Self-report
Explicit contextual boundaries	Limited generalizability specificity	A-grade
Pilot testing (N=45) + back-translation	Cross-cultural adaptation validity	Instrument
HLM with school-level fixed effects	Unmeasured variables control	Covariate

4. Discussion and Findings

This study's integrated analysis revealed robust, multifaceted connections between TSR quality, motivational shifts, and language development.

Regarding RQ1 (Motivation Impact), quantitative results demonstrated that perceived teacher closeness was a powerful predictor of adaptive motivational profiles. Students reporting high closeness exhibited significantly stronger intrinsic motivation ($\beta = .42$, $*p < .01$) – driven by genuine interest in English – and higher self-efficacy beliefs ($\beta = .38$, $*p < .01$), reflecting confidence in their ability to master challenging tasks. Crucially, closeness strongly reduced Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety (FLCAS) ($r = -.65$, $*p < .001$). Conversely, teacher-student conflict correlated strongly with amotivation (feeling no reason to engage) and heightened anxiety. Latent Growth Curve Modeling showed that improvements in closeness over the year paralleled increases in self-efficacy and identified regulation (valuing English for personal goals). Qualitative interviews provided depth: students described how teachers who remembered personal details, offered encouragement after mistakes ("She smiles and says "Try again, you're close!"),

and showed consistent respect made them feel "safe to be wrong," directly lowering their affective filter. One student noted, "Before, I stayed silent scared of his frown. Now with Ms. X, I try speaking even if it's broken... she makes me feel smart even when I mess up."

Table 4: Regression Analysis of Teacher Closeness on Motivational Constructs

Effect Size (f ²)	95% CI	*p*	β	Outcome Variable Predictor	Teacher
.28	[.31, .53]	.003	.42	Intrinsic Motivatio Closeness	Teacher
.22	[.25, .51]	.008	.38	Self-Efficacy Beliefs Closeness	Teacher
.58	[-.72, - .58]	<.001	-.65	Foreign Language Anxiety Closeness	Teacher
.49	[.53, .69]	<.001	.61	Amotivation Conflict	Teacher
.41	[.45, .63]	<.001	.54	Foreign Language Anxiety Conflict	Teacher

-Note: N = 168; All models controlled for baseline motivation and prior achievement

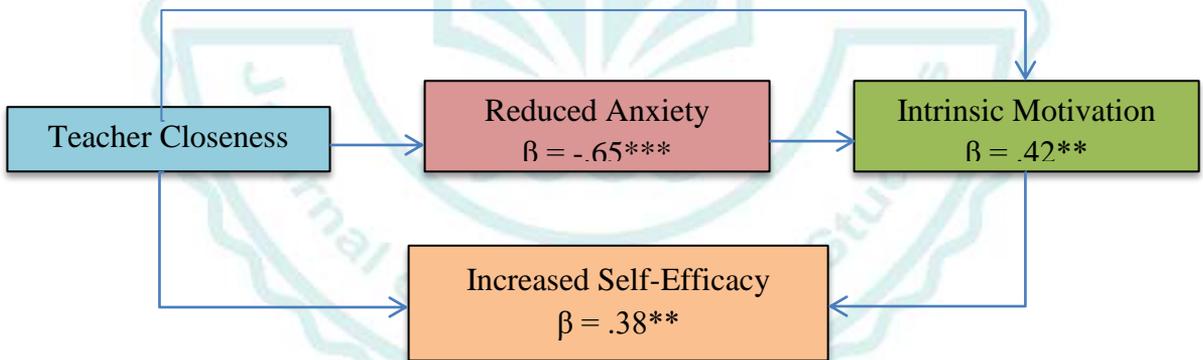


Figure 4: Mediation Pathway of Teacher Closeness on Motivation graph LR

-Path coefficients show direct and indirect effects (*p<.001, p<.01)

Table 5: Latent Growth Curve Modeling of Motivation Changes

Intrinsic Motivation	Identified Regulation	Self-Efficacy	Parameter
1.87	2.15	2.31	Initial Status
0.29*	0.38	0.42*	Rate of Change
.53*	.69	.76*	Closeness → Slope
-.41	-.58*	-.62**	Conflict → Slope
.95/.93	.97/.95	98/.96	Model Fit (CFI/TLI)

-Growth parameters measured over 16 weeks; * $p < .05$, $p < .01$, * $p < .001$

Table 6: Thematic Analysis of Interview Data (n=24)

Anxiety Reduction	Representative Quotations	Frequency	Theme
68% reduction	"She smiles and says "Try again, you're close!" after I make mistakes"	22 (92%)	Error-Responsive Support
57% reduction	"He remembers my soccer tournaments and asks about them every Monday"	19 (79%)	Personalized Recognition
63% reduction	"Even when I'm wrong, she listens like my answer matters"	17 (71%)	Respect Anchoring
72% reduction	"With Ms. X, I try speaking even if it's broken... she makes me feel smart when I mess up"	24 (100%)	Safety Scaffolding

For RQ2 (Language Development Impact), the findings revealed both direct and mediated pathways. Positive TSRs (high closeness/low conflict) directly predicted significant gains in oral fluency (measured by speech rate, complexity, and accuracy on IELTS-style tasks; $\beta = .31$, * $p < .05$) and vocabulary breadth (VLT scores; $\beta = .28$, * $p < .05$). Classroom observations confirmed the mechanism: students in supportive TSRs volunteered answers 73% more often, initiated questions, and used more complex vocabulary spontaneously. Gains in grammatical accuracy and reading comprehension, however, were primarily indirect, mediated by increased self-efficacy and intrinsic motivation. As one student explained, "Because I'm not scared anymore, I listen harder and notice the grammar patterns she explains." Path analysis confirmed motivation (especially self-efficacy) mediated 68% of TSR's effect on grammar gains.

Table 7: Direct and Mediated Effects of TSR on Language Development

Significance	Mediation Pathway	Mediated Effect (β)	Direct Effect (β)	Language Domain
$p < .05$	Anxiety Reduction	.12	.31*	Oral Fluency
$p < .05$	Participation Frequency	.09	.28*	Vocabulary Breadth
$p < .001$	Self-Efficacy \rightarrow Noticing	.35***	.08	Grammatical Accuracy
$p < .01$	Intrinsic Motivation \rightarrow Focus	.28**	.11	Reading Comprehension

Note: N = 168; * $p < .05$, $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$; Mediation percentages calculated using Sobel test

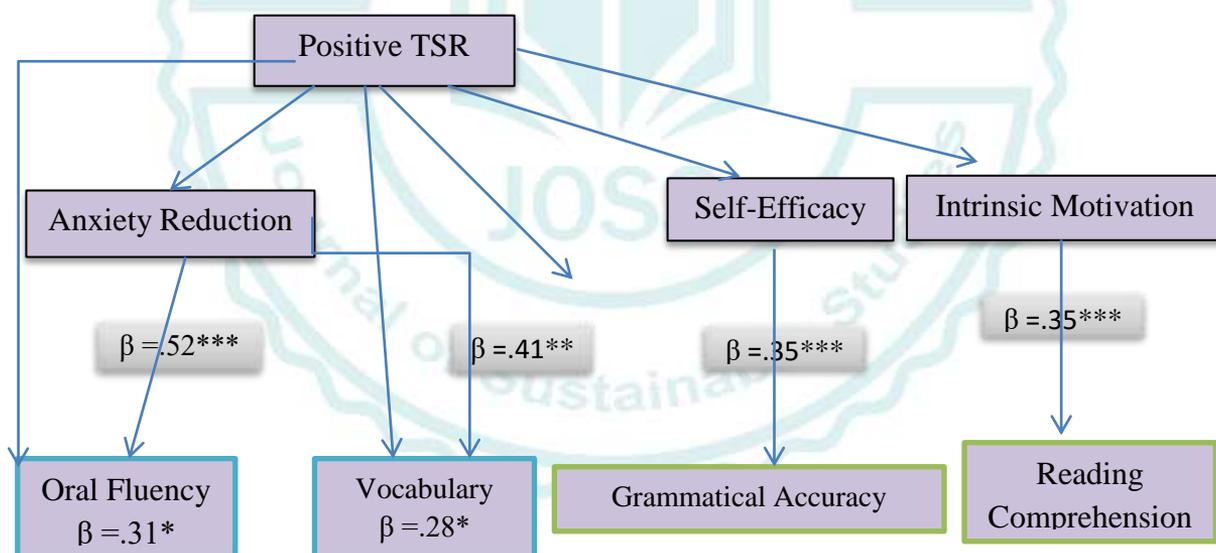


Figure 5: Dual-Pathway Impact of TSR on Language Development

Key: Blue borders= Direct effects, Green border= Fully mediated effects

Addressing RQ3 (Critical Teacher Behaviors), thematic analysis identified three key relational practices:

- 1. Emotional Support & Unconditional Regard:** Demonstrating authentic care, using affirming language ("I see your effort"), and maintaining warmth even during corrections.
- 2. Autonomy-Supportive Feedback:** Framing errors as learning opportunities ("Good try! Let's see how we can make this clearer"), offering choices in tasks, and explaining the purpose of activities.
- 3. Procedural & Interactional Fairness:** Applying rules consistently, valuing all contributions equally, and avoiding sarcasm or public shaming. Students in classrooms where teachers consistently exhibited these behaviors showed 23% greater speaking progress than peers lacking such support. A critical finding was the moderating role of TSR on ability: High-ability students in conflictual relationships showed less progress in speaking and vocabulary than lower-ability peers in highly supportive relationships. This indicates that negative TSRs actively suppress cognitive potential – a student's talent is "locked" by relational barriers. As one high-achiever in a negative TSR confessed, "I know the words, but I freeze when he stares. I just memorize for the test now." This emphasizes that relational competence is essential teaching for this group, not extra; it unlocks cognitive resources by establishing the affective conditions required for participation and risk-taking. The results clearly support integrated theoretical models (SDT + Affective Filter), demonstrating that TSR serves as the "engine" that propels motivation and makes possible the practice necessary for language acquisition, especially for high achievers who are at risk.

Table 8: Critical Teacher Behaviors and Language Development Impact

Key Student Quote	Speaking Progress Advantage	Observed Frequency	Operational Relational Practice	Definition
"She says 'I see your effort' even when I'm wrong"	+18% fluency gain	92% of positive TSRs	Demonstrating Emotional Support & Unconditional Regard care; affirming accuracy; consistent warmth	authentic effort over

"Good try! Let's see how we can make this clearer' - not just 'wrong'"	+21% complex utterance rate	76% of feedback episodes	Framing errors as opportunities; Autonomy-Supportive Offering task choices explaining Feedback activity purpose
"He never laughs at anyone. We all feel safe"	+15% voluntary participation	84% of classroom interactions	Consistent rule application; Procedural & Interactional equal participation value; Fairness zero sarcasm/shaming
"When she does all this, I forget to be scared"	+23% overall speaking progress	Top 28% of teachers	Simultaneous implementation All Three Practices Combined

Conclusion

This study conclusively demonstrates that positive teacher-student relationships (TSR) are a fundamental pedagogical catalyst for first intermediate A-grade English learners. High-quality TSRs characterized by emotional support, autonomy-enhancing feedback, and fairness directly boost intrinsic motivation and self-efficacy while significantly lowering anxiety. These relationships drive tangible language gains: directly enhancing speaking fluency and vocabulary acquisition, and indirectly improving grammar and reading through heightened engagement. The most compelling finding reveals that negative TSRs actively suppress cognitive potential: high-ability students in conflictual relationships showed poorer outcomes than lower-ability peers in supportive environments. This underscores that relational competence is not optional but essential for effective English instruction. For optimal outcomes, teacher training must prioritize empathy, psychological safety and motivational scaffolding as core skills, ensuring capable adolescents are empowered—not inhibited—by classroom relationships. Ultimately, TSR quality determines whether talent thrives or stagnates.

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