



## **Exploring the link between teacher-student interactions and EFL student motivation: Insights from Rwandan secondary schools**

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### **Abstract**

Many studies have reported that strong motivation between students and their teachers leads to successful English language learning. The vital function of teacher-student interactions in improving student learning still lacks comprehensive research in multilingual countries, particularly in the Rwandan EFL context. This research investigates how teacher-student relations affect the motivational levels of EFL students from Rwandan secondary schools, and how senior English teachers and students develop intrinsic and extrinsic motivation through emotional support, individualized teaching methods, and interactive respect. The study employed a qualitative method with a case study design. Data were gathered from ten teachers and four high school students using semi-structured interviews, and then analyzed thematically. The results indicate that good teacher-student relations promote English learning by motivating students' active participation and better results, which are ensured by the teacher's interest and positive attitude towards students. The research affirms the need for teacher professional development programs, which have the potential to impart practical, relational teaching strategies to various students. The result of studies assists in the acquisition of multicultural language learning. Policymakers can consider these findings to develop education policies promoting student motivation and EFL success in Rwandan classrooms.

**Keywords:** educational policy, Rwandan EFL classrooms, second language acquisition, student motivation, teacher-student interaction, teaching strategies

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## Introduction

Learning performance and student educational progress largely depend on the bonds they have with teachers (Amerstorfer & Frein von Münster-Kistner, 2021). Studies demonstrate that positive teacher-student relationships contribute to the formation of trust and emotional security, which promotes learners' readiness to actively engage in classroom activities (Sandeman, 2022). These relationships also provide a positive environment in which students feel appreciated, which in turn leads to academic engagement and motivation (Zheng, 2022). However, despite the significance of teacher-student relationships and motivation in language learning being identified, literature is scarce regarding the interaction of the two in Rwandan secondary schools. Low engagement and poor performance in English are still evident among many students. Thus, this study examines the connection between teacher-student relationships and student motivation in the English as a foreign language (EFL) classroom in Rwanda.

Regarding the issue of the teacher-student relationships and student motivation in the EFL classroom, motivation becomes a crucial variable that influences students' performance and participation in learning a second language. The literature underlines that more powerful motivation levels indicate increased language acquisition and classroom performance (Darvin & Norton, 2023). The primary instruction language in Rwanda is English; therefore, students must be motivated to learn it to achieve success in their education and to unlock their future professional potential.

According to previous studies, maintaining motivation is among the significant problems in multilingual EFL settings, where sociocultural and policy-related aspects interfere with learners' engagement. Studies also indicate that teacher-student relationships and emotional support are vital in learners' intrinsic and extrinsic motivation (Gao et al., 2025). However, the interplay is not investigated regarding the Rwandan EFL setting. There are also unique challenges to the language policy, cultural context, and interaction between teachers and students within such an environment.

The area of motivation in the second language learning context has been researched within the theoretical approaches, particularly in terms of Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985) and the L2 Motivational Self System (Dörnyei, 2019). The self-determination theory suggests that most students become more motivated to learn when their learning environment meets their psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Brenner, 2022; Guay, 2022). In the meantime, the L2 Motivational Self System, introduced by Dörnyei, explicitly addresses a student's vision of their Ideal L2 Self—a specific vision of how people demonstrate proficiency in a second language (Cho, 2020), which helps the student stay motivated and persistent in language learning in the long run. Self-determination theory and L2 Motivational Self theory also offer a fundamental pattern that could be used to characterize the inspirational position of relationships and emotions. Learners are most interested in studying when their educational establishments are aware of their inner desire to become independent and competent and support the development of relationships with peers (Gimbert et al., 2023).

The way students learn in EFL classrooms affects how teachers communicate with them (Zhi & Wang, 2024). A successful teacher supports students in feeling a sense of belonging and acquiring the skills needed, helping them become more motivated in English. The L2 Motivational Self System stresses that students must develop an ideal L2 self-picture, which involves seeing themselves as proficient in English (Sandeman, 2022). Students determine their motivation through their perceptions of classroom learning conditions and commitment to language proficiency. Strong, supportive relationships between teachers guide students in developing their ideal L2 self while reinforcing the value of English proficiency for their academic and professional careers.

Previous research in Tanzania demonstrates that teacher engagement has a tremendous positive effect on the motivation of students to learn English (Bamuhiga & Kimambo, 2025). Nonetheless, these findings cannot be generalized to Rwanda because of the variation in educational policies and sociocultural background. Hence, the proposed research aims to investigate the role of teacher-student relationships in motivating Rwandan students in EFL classrooms, a research gap not yet filled in the East African region. Using English as an instructional language in Rwanda has presented a problem to learners with limited exposure to the language beyond the learning institutions (Sibomana, 2022). The Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985) and the L2 Motivational Self System (Dörnyei, 2019) claim that students' motivation increases when their needs in the forms of autonomy, competency, and relatedness are satisfied by teachers. Therefore, it is necessary to explore how the

Rwandan EFL teachers can use such motivational principles via feedback and communication to comprehend and enhance the engagement of students.

In spite of Rwanda investing in teacher training, some teachers find it difficult to keep students motivated and engaged in EFL classrooms (Robinson, 2022; Xue, 2022). This limitation demonstrates that research examining the role of relational practices of teachers in enhancing the motivation of students is necessary. In this way, the given research helps to supply the empirical data, which can be utilized in the organized teacher-training program, which should be concerned with the motivational classroom interaction. Recent research stresses the idea that qualitative approaches, mainly interviews, give more information about the emotional and relational processes between teachers and students (Arabai & Algazzaz, 2024; Wang et al., 2023). These methods are sensitive to the emotional support of teachers that influences the motivation of learners, which is usually ignored in standardized surveys (Moskowitz et al., 2022). In multicultural and multilingual settings such as Rwanda, such procedures are essential in getting the facts in the classroom that quantitative research tools might overlook. Consequently, a qualitative case study design investigates the role of teacher-student relationships in the motivation of EFL classrooms in Rwanda.

The teacher-student relationships in Rwanda have been the subject of insufficient scholarly research, yet their contribution to maintaining motivation in multilingual EFL education environments is essential. The shift to English as the primary medium of instruction in Rwanda has posed critical motivational and linguistic difficulties to both instructors and students (Gao et al., 2025; Sibomana, 2022). Based on the theory of Self-Determination (Deci & Ryan, 1985) and the L2 Motivational Self System (Dornyei, 2019), the motivation of students is achieved when their psychological needs relatedness, competence, and autonomy are satisfied due to positive interaction with the teacher. Thus, observing the dynamics of such relationships in Rwanda's Kinyarwanda, French, and English classrooms is imperative to identify and mitigate the motivational barriers to such a multilingual educational situation. Therefore, this research addresses the identified knowledge gaps and the crucial role of teacher-student relationships in motivating students by seeking answers to the following research questions:

- (1) How do teachers perceive their relationships with students in EFL classrooms in Rwanda?
- (2) In what ways do teacher-student relationships influence students' intrinsic and extrinsic motivation to learn English?

## Literature review

### *How teachers connect with students in EFL classrooms*

Teacher-student interactions within English as a foreign language (EFL) classrooms require a more profound understanding to build student motivation for language education (Moskowitz et al., 2022). English learners in Rwanda, whose primary language is not English, require stronger teacher motivation to develop both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. This study examines the relationship between the teacher-student connection and EFL motivation, exploring how it impacts students. The review examines previous research studies to identify areas of weakness that need to be addressed in the current inquiry.

Educational psychology researchers emphasize that teacher-student relationships significantly impact the extent to which students learn and their emotional well-being (Zheng, 2022). There is evidence that establishing positive relationships between teachers and students promotes student engagement, improves motivation levels, and increases academic success (Li et al., 2022). Relationships between teachers and students are essential because EFL students need to be well-motivated and consistently present in class. Evidence indicates that supporting students in class and using interactive approaches helps them communicate more willingly (Borasheva, 2024). Hence, this literature introduces the current study by revealing that teacher-student relationships play a key role in maintaining intrinsic and extrinsic motivation within the Rwandan EFL setting, representing a focal point in the research.

### *Motivation in EFL learning*

The key factor determining how successful students become in learning English as a foreign language is their level of motivation. The research field differentiates motivation into intrinsic aspects, where learners seek internal fulfillment while learning, and extrinsic features stem from external rewards, including grades, career opportunities, and parental pressure (Deci & Ryan, 1985). When teachers regularly use positive comments, energetic support, and active student involvement, students become more motivated (Cents-Boonstra et al., 2021). Rwandan EFL learning environments primarily rely on discipline and effective methods to motivate and assess students. Evidence shows that if teachers use teacher immediacy, it helps spur student motivation. Students find learning more engaging when teachers exhibit behaviors such as smiling, maintaining eye contact, and providing individualized feedback. Experts must investigate whether these behaviors are suitable and effective in EFL classrooms in Rwanda.

Therefore, this subsection demonstrates that intrinsic and extrinsic motivation are crucial in EFL learning. It also highlights the role of teacher support and interaction in molding students' motivation. It directly informs the current study, which examines the role of teacher-student relations in motivating Rwandan secondary school students to study English.

### ***Motivational factors caused by teacher-student relationships***

Previous studies suggest the existence of specific motivational processes that are facilitated by positive teacher-student relationships characterized by emotional support, constructive feedback, teacher enthusiasm, trust, and respect. These elements help increase both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, resulting in safe learning experiences when students are valued and recognized (Alrabai & Algazzaz, 2024). The teachers should be empathetic, maintain eye contact, and provide individualized feedback, which aligns with the associated motivational aspect of the Self-Determination Theory by Deci and Ryan (1985) and motivates students to become an active part of the learning process.

Furthermore, the possibility of receiving teacher encouragement and mentoring activities outside of classroom activities, including monitoring the emotional state of students, also becomes a potent factor that determines persistence and effort on the part of learners (Wiraningsih & Santosa, 2020). These factors are particularly significant in Rwandan EFL classrooms, as students are often involved in linguistic and cultural shifts. In this way, aspects such as emotional safety, autonomy-supportive teaching, and culturally responsive interaction align with the literature and support the notion that research on motivation outcomes identifies the relational quality between teachers and learners as a primary factor (Moskowitz et al., 2022; Robinson, 2022). To end, this subsection shows how the motivational variables based on teacher-student relationships, including emotional support, constructive feedback, and culturally responsive teaching, are directly associated with the research purpose of investigating the effects of these relationships on intrinsic and extrinsic motivation in Rwandan EFL classrooms.

## **Method**

### ***Research design***

The study employed a qualitative case study research design (Yin, 2009) to explore the impact of teacher-student relationships on learners of English in Rwandan secondary schools. The design formulation was operationalised by gathering qualitative information in the form of semi-structured interview data

on teachers and students who teach English, transcribing and theming-analysing their data to determine patterns connecting the relational practices to motivation (Gioia, 2021; Yin, 2009). The case study helped us gain rich and contextual information in direct relation to the study's aim to discuss the teachers' perception and how their relationship influences the intrinsic and extrinsic motivation of learners.

### *Participants*

Ten teachers and four students were involved in this study as the research participants. The ten teachers were chosen following the purposive sampling approach described by Ahmad and Wilkins (2025) based on their high-level teaching status in English and having five years or more experience in teaching in EFL secondary classrooms in the country of Rwanda, functioning as the best people of their standing to comment on student motivation and teacher-student relations. They were selected to represent mixed-gender schools in rural and semi-urban areas of Gicumbi District in Rwanda, a location characterized by under-resourced education institutions, limited access to electricity, and multilingual learner groups.

The participants were ten teachers (four females and six males) whose ages ranged between 27 and 54 years. They were also at least five-year experienced teachers in Rwandan secondary schools in English. Four students (two males and two females) aged 18 and 21 years and taking a Languages combination (Literature in English, French, Kiswahili, and Kinyarwanda) were also present. The teachers were the representatives of mixed-gender schools in the rural and semi-urban areas, and the students were chosen from Groupe Scolaire Giti and Groupe Scolaire Rwamiko. The purposive recruitment method was to recruit the students based on their English teachers, with permission to recruit them by the school, and only by volunteering, where students were included.

Table 1 presents the profiles of the research participants. It shows the demographic data of the participants with detailed profiles such as gender, age, school, and taught or learnt subjects. It displays a better view of the diversity and balance in teacher selection and shows the representativeness of the sample to examine the teacher-student relationships and their impact on teacher motivation in Rwandan EFL classrooms.

### *Data collection*

The data for this study were collected through semi-structured interviews conducted via video calls on WhatsApp. We selected this interviewing method due to its accessibility benefits, including reduced travel expenses and

convenience factors, which decreased participants' obstacles. Real-time face-to-face communication enabled through WhatsApp lets participants feel at ease with honest feedback. Semi-structured interviews are known to be very flexible in qualitative research in that they allow the exploration of the participants' experiences with comparability across the responses (Priyadarshini, 2020).

**Table 1**

*The demographic information of participants*

Participant	Gender	Age range	School name	Subjects taught/course of study
<i>Teachers:</i>				
Teacher 1	Male	25–45	Groupe Scolaire	English, kinyarwanda
Teacher 2	Female	25–45	Bukure	English, Swahili
Teacher 3	Male	25–45	Groupe Scolaire Giti	English, French
Teacher 4	Male	25–45	Groupe Scolaire	English, kinyarwanda
Teacher 5	Male	25–45	Nyanza	English, Swahili
Teacher 6	Female	25–45		English, French
Teacher 7	Male	25–45	Groupe Scolaire Rwamiko	English, Kinyarwanda
Teacher 8	Female	25–45	Groupe Scolaire	
Teacher 9	Male	25–45	Rwesero	
Teacher 10	Female	25–45		English, French
<i>Students:</i>				
Student 1	Male	18–21	Groupe Scolaire Giti	Literature in English,
Student 2	Female	18–21		French, Kiswahili,
Student 3	Male	18–21	Groupe Scolaire	Kinyarwanda
Student 4	Female	18–21	Rwamiko	

We reviewed the study's goals and relevant articles to develop the interview plan. To find detailed information, the interview changed to open-ended questions. Our questions for research were outlined in this way: (1) 'How would you describe your relationship with your students in the English classroom?' (2) 'What impact do you think your interaction with the teacher creates in English learning motivation?' and (3) 'What strategies do you use to enhance student motivation in the EFL classroom?' These questions were structured to allow flexibility while ensuring consistency in responses across 14 participants, both teachers and students.

The interviews ranged from 10 to 20 minutes, and the participants consented to recording procedures. We recorded all interviews before performing a verbatim transcription to protect the participants' original statements. The accuracy of recorded transcripts underwent a two-step verification process,

including participant verification of recorded transcripts and our independent transcription validity checks.

### *Data analysis*

We conducted a thematic analysis using the framework provided by Braun and Clarke (2022). This approach was preferred due to its consistency in identifying the main themes among the data, ultimately simplifying the finding of results. The basic steps to data analysis were as follows. Before concluding, we analyzed the transcripts multiple times after transcribing the interviews, allowing participants to review and correct their answers. Second, every primary concept and repeated idea in our study was noted in my records. We systematically reviewed information to identify statements related to teacher and student motivation. All the data was manually coded to preserve correctness and full recognition of the details. Third, we grouped identified codes according to their research questions. The analysis identified three essential themes that combine Teacher Support and Motivation with “Classroom Atmosphere” and “Challenges in Student Engagement.” Fourth, a review process was conducted to verify the consistency, coherence, and proper representation of the refined themes against the original evidence. We combined and redefined any duplicate themes to improve understanding. Fifth, we established precise definitions and names for each theme to explain its significance to the study. Finally, the final themes were interpreted based on existing literature, which contributed to the completion of the analysis of the findings. Additional participant quotes, reflecting the themes, appeared in the text to provide evidence of the main points. The example of the coding process is illustrated in Table 2.

**Table 2**

*An example of the coding process*

Excerpts	Codes	Theme
“I always motivate students by giving them positive feedback on their progress.”	Encouragement, positive feedback, mentoring	Teacher support & motivation
“I try to establish a learning environment where students feel free to join discussions actively.”	Friendly environment, student engagement	Classroom atmosphere
“Learning materials accessibility is one primary factor that motivates students to struggle with their motivational drive.”	Low participation, external distractions, limited resources	Challenges in student engagement

### ***Trustworthiness***

To make this study trustworthy, we adhered to the generally accepted criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Enworo, 2023). Member checking enhanced credibility since the participants needed to check their written transcripts and thematic results. Dependability was enhanced by maintaining a clear audit trail of the research process, including systematic data collection, transcription, and thematic analysis steps (Amin et al., 2020). Confirmability was ensured by triangulating multiple data sources, participant interviews, thematic analysis results, and feedback from a peer reviewer not directly involved in the primary data collection. The transferability was supported by the fact that the research context, participants, and procedures were described in depth so that the readers could conclude whether the findings can be applied in other EFL classroom contexts. A combination of these operational strategies provided the rigor and credibility of the current research.

### **Findings**

The results of the present qualitative study reveal a contextualized perspective on teacher-student relationships in EFL secondary classrooms in Rwanda, particularly in the semi-urban and rural Gicumbi districts. Teachers and students participating in the study had firsthand experiences of the interactions affected by multilingual realities, including the scarcity of resources and the national policy that prioritizes English as the language of education. Their views offer insight into the relational, motivational, and pedagogical aspects that must be provided to facilitate improved language acquisition in an environment where students and teachers tend to use English as a second language.

#### ***Teachers' perceptions of their relationships with students in EFL classrooms***

The first research question aimed to explore how teachers perceive their relationships with students in EFL classrooms in Rwanda. Through qualitative methods, teachers demonstrated multiple viewpoints, yet they agreed on the importance of the student-teacher relationship for maintaining a supportive learning atmosphere. Teacher 1, as an example, stated:

My educational practice goes beyond content delivery responsibilities because I dedicate myself to helping my students academically and emotionally through their growth process. The achievement of language acquisition depends on teachers who assess their educational and emotional influence to create better student motivation and educational results. Being emotionally open to students helps develop the confidence that students need to interact freely with me. I am

available on a flexible basis to work with struggling learners on a one-on-one basis, and I promote the idea of peer mentoring so that no one feels left behind. Developing such an understanding enables me to identify personal student needs, which in turn enhances how I conduct my instruction. (Teacher 1, Interview)

The excerpt above indicates that teachers who go beyond content delivery promote academic and emotional development in learners. This indicates the overall results of the study that emotional openness and individualized support are the two key elements of student motivation that can be improved in the Rwandan EFL classrooms, as they provide a secure background in which students feel appreciated and involved. Another example, as Teacher 2 said:

My teaching methods that express passion for English directly drive my students toward education because students notice my subject enthusiasm, which automatically makes them engage with their studies. My behavior affects students' motivation in two ways, both for better and worse results. As long as I demonstrate that I enjoy my subject, students respect me even more and imitate my passion in the process. In some instances, I theatricalize scenes from English literature or recite grammar in songs to help me memorize them. The products of creativity have established connections that transcend conventional authority. Students enjoy the feeling that we are studying English, not just that I am teaching them. (Teacher 2, Interview)

The above excerpt reveals that the teachers' teaching experience also emphasizes the importance of enthusiasm and creativity in teaching, which leads to student motivation. The students react by following suit in this passion, thus developing a certain level of respect and further commitment to study. This shows that teaching passion in combination with innovative pedagogy can have a positive impact on the motivation of learners, making the classroom relaxed instead of authoritative.

#### *Impact on students' motivation*

The findings regarding how teacher-student relationships impact students' motivations to learn English emerged from addressing the second research goal. The research data support the idea that student learning motivation depends directly on their development of trust, respect, and emotional bonds. As Teacher 3 stated:

Within my teaching environment, I establish a relationship consisting of mutual respect to enable students to ask questions without hesitation or risk of error. A core set of teacher-student relationship elements consists of respect, care, and

trust. I also learn about their backgrounds and the little achievements they have made in and out of the English class. In the case of a student excelling in a sports event or any other subject, I would place it in the class as a way of giving them a sense of worth. Such activities can eliminate the fear and make the English class feel like an environment where it is permitted to express and experiment. (Teacher 3, Interview)

The experience of Teacher 3 makes it clear that respect, trust, and focus on the achievements of students beyond the classroom are the key to maintaining motivation. Teacher 4 further supported the finding as acknowledged:

Fostering better teacher-student bonds comes from humility among educators and their admission of learning constraints. Student engagement increases when students feel comfortable seeking assistance from me because they learn to develop strategies that help maintain their learning passion. I always convince my learners that making mistakes in language learning has a positive impact. For example, to support this, I often share stories of my struggles at the beginning of my English learning journey, highlighting the illegitimacy of focusing solely on failure. When pupils learn from my experiences, they relax their minds and become more engaged. (Teacher 4, Interview)

The above excerpt emphasizes that humility and sharing personal struggles create better teacher-student relationships. This relational practice encourages a comfortable learning atmosphere in which learners are made to feel encouraged, thus enhancing intrinsic motivation and active involvement towards learning the English language. Teacher 7 added another layer to this understanding:

Students participate more actively in learning English after experiencing my authentic interest in how they feel different and my energetic approach to understanding what happens outside classroom sessions. Student learning progresses most effectively when teachers observe and award appreciation to their students during classroom activities. In addition to the lessons, I also enquire with my students as to how they are doing at home, in case they are performing poorly. This creates a connection between professional activities and life. The linguistic classroom does not only cover grammar and vocabulary; it is a safe ground where feelings can be expressed through language, allowing students to pick up assignments. (Teacher 7, Interview)

As the excerpt above, the teacher shows that when teachers take an interest in the students, reward efforts, and relate classroom learning to their personal lives, students become more motivated to learn English.

#### *Challenges in building teacher-student relationships*

Studies have identified several barriers that affect teachers' efforts to build strong student relationships. Motivation faces obstacles because of three external elements: student fear, classroom management issues, and a lack of student engagement. Teacher 5, as an example, noted:

Most students feel intimidated about talking in English publicly because they experience fear of mistakes and shyness during communication. Sincere connections between students and teachers enable education to take priority. I plan to minimize this fear by starting lessons with informal talks or games in English. Still, despite these efforts, classes are large, and it is challenging to reach everyone every time. I must admit that there are occasions when timid learners barely utter a word after the entire term, and it is painful knowing that they could do this perfectly. (Teacher 5, Interview)

The excerpt above indicates that the experience of the teacher demonstrates that students do not want to speak English because they are afraid of making errors and are shy, which means that anxiety becomes a barrier to participation. Although the teacher applies informal conversation and games to relax the situation, they find it hard to manage big classes, preventing the opportunity to provide individualized support. Teacher 6, as the example also stated:

My absence of student relationship development blocks proper learning guidance and student education success. Teaching professionals spend substantial energy controlling classroom discipline, alongside diverse student handling, and reducing workplace stress. Although I would like to concentrate on developing a rapport with learners, work and administrative pressures often prevent me from paying attention to individual learners. Sometimes, I have been more of a conductor of conduct than of students of minds. This system should be changed so that we can focus on what is truly important, i.e., connecting with our learners. (Teacher 6, Interview)

As the above excerpt, the teacher points out how the school administration pressure and discipline management restrict the possibility of establishing good teacher-student relationships. The passage shows that systemic limitations interfere with motivation-based instruction that calls for changes aimed at promoting relational interest to enhance the learning outcomes of students in Rwandan EFL classrooms.

The results demonstrate that students who fear mistakes in their foreign language studies tend to participate less in class. Most teachers identify self-consciousness as the main factor stopping students from speaking out and actively participating in language learning. The teachers demonstrate that motivation grows when there is a sense of emotional support and safety in the

way students communicate with teachers. The emotional openness, trust, and genuine care that the participants described are essential factors in promoting language learning, particularly in EFL settings where fear and a lack of self-confidence are prevalent.

#### *Classroom atmosphere and its role in motivation*

The research examined the impact of an educational environment on student motivation levels. Students actively participate in their learning space when they feel better supported, as the climate fosters genuine self-expression. The teachers confirmed that a welcoming and friendly learning environment is critical for students to succeed in their language studies. As Teacher 8 stated:

Students get involved meaningfully when an environment supports their satisfaction and reflects their sense of comfort. Learning English becomes more effective through open-mindedness because students choose to participate after feeling welcome in the classroom. (Teacher 8, Interview)

As the above excerpt, it is indicated that the experience of the teacher demonstrates that the positive and friendly classroom environment contributes to making students have more reasons to study the English language. Learners are more willing to participate when they feel relaxed and important, and this leads to meaningful involvement that enhances language acquisition. This shows the significance of good emotional and relational situations in maintaining motivation. Another example, Teacher 9 also said:

Student language learning development hinges on their acknowledgment of dedication despite our correction of their errors. My approach dismisses punishment methods to provide students with constructive feedback opportunities. I do not use crossing-out mistakes or red ink in my feedback. Rather than do this, I highlight and pose questions such as, What do you think ought to sound better here? This empowers students and makes them feel capable of revising their work. Their readiness to give a go is stoked by such independence. (Teacher 9, Interview)

The excerpt above reveals that the feedback strategy of the teacher puts more emphasis on the autonomy-supportive practice by substituting punitive correction with constructive questioning. The teacher can enhance the independence of learners and their willingness to actively participate in the process of work revision by providing them with a safe environment in which they can recognize their mistakes as part of the learning process.

The feedback suggests that learning environments should provide positive settings that enable students to assess their language skills without anxiety. Students acquire increased self-confidence and internal motivation for learning when teachers establish an environment that views wrong answers as learning opportunities.

The interviews with these teachers reveal that personal sensitivity and learner-centered approaches are key mechanisms for creating a classroom environment that fosters motivation. Individual and interactive decorations, positive feedback, and awareness of learner anxiety all indicate that educators share a common opinion: motivation grows when learners feel safe, competent, and emotionally understood within their learning context.

#### *The role of teacher encouragement and mentorship*

Teacher-student relationships between mentors who encourage their students show strong evidence of enhancing student motivation. The learning process for language acquisition is optimized when teachers guide students through conventional educational settings and beyond. Teacher 10, for example, explained:

Encouragement through personal engagement is critical in my teaching method. I check on students beyond classroom time to validate their academic advancement and inspire their learning motives. My weekly routine was to write small handwritten messages to the students who had shown improvement, even in attitude. (Teacher 10, Interview)

The above excerpt shows that the approach of teacher shows how individual involvement outside the classroom setting, like writing notes of encouragement, can reinforce the sense of worth and encouragement in students. This approach represents relational teaching that authenticates the progress of learners and increases academic confidence, along with intrinsic motivation according to its self-determination principles.

Education becomes more effective for students when teachers demonstrate personal care and concern for their students. Teachers enhance student motivation through additional student support outside scheduled classroom hours and their role as mentors and instructors of class materials. The strategies that teachers emphasized in a personal approach included handwritten notes, emotional outpour, and recognition of student accomplishments, representing a pattern of steady caring and validation. These interviews indicate a relational style of working that values students and constructs a safe emotional context,

which directly predetermines the readiness of learners to contribute and continue learning in English.

***Student views on the student-teacher relationship and its impact on the motivation to learn English***

Four high school students (two male and two female) from the Gicumbi district, as part of the Groupe Scolaire Giti and Groupe Scolaire Rwamiko, were included in the study to supplement the information gathered through interviews with teachers.

***Feeling safe to make mistakes***

A positive learning atmosphere, in which mistakes are treated as learning opportunities, will make learners feel motivated to learn. A sense of security in making mistakes without the fear of being mocked or penalized serves to build self-confidence as well as resilience in the students to continue practicing English in class without fear. Student 1, for instance, said:

My English class is comfortable since my teacher consistently demonstrates to me that he cares about my feelings. When I make mistakes, he does not laugh or impose punishment. Instead, he reiterates and advises me to persevere. This causes me to believe that I can learn English even though I did not speak it at home. (Student 1, Interview)

As mentioned in the above excerpt, the student shows that positive behavior by teachers characterized by empathy, support, and non-punitive feedback contributes towards a sense of safety and perseverance in the student. This pleasant emotional atmosphere enhances the confidence and intrinsic motivation of the learner to believe that they have the potential to learn English despite their limited exposure at home. Another example, as Student 2 addressed:

I used to be afraid of speaking English, as I was worried it would be unacceptable to my friends, and they could laugh at me. Nevertheless, everyone is given an opportunity by my teacher, and he never puts us down. We are made to talk in small groups, and I now feel confident when I can express myself effectively. I am working very hard in English since I intend to be a tour guide in the future. (Student 2, Interview)

The above excerpt indicates that the student demonstrates the impact of the supportive practices of a teacher on the ability to eliminate fear of ridicule and establish confidence through the efforts of giving equal opportunities and facilitating group discussions. This is a reciprocal interaction that not only increases the propensity of the learner to speak but also bridges motivation to an

adult career goal, indicating the transformative influence of teacher support in maintaining an EFL investment.

*The value of teacher availability and academic support*

The presence of teachers and academic support is the essential point of student motivation in the EFL classroom. In addition to emotional support, students appreciate the willingness of teachers to offer both in-class and out-of-class support because it boosts their confidence, interest, and performance directly, particularly when resources are scarce, as Student 3 acknowledged:

I found it challenging to learn English since it is not used in our home. However, my teacher is rigorous and allows us more free time to clarify what we do not understand. He even allows us to ask questions after classes. Now I like English even more, at least I desire to pass the national exams. (Student 3, Interview)

The excerpt above reveals that the student explained the essence of teacher commitment beyond the classroom, particularly in rural Rwanda Contexts where learners do not get exposed to English practices within their households. The Teacher provided instructions and personal guidance, using extrinsic motivation to promote academic success and exam performance.

*Frustration to interest in depth teaching*

The learning of English is something that some students find discouraging at first, but with a positive teaching style, it can change. By modifying approaches to the needs of the learners, the teachers transform the lack of interest into active interest and demonstrate how the relational and context-sensitive approach to pedagogy can lead to more profound motivation and learning. Student 4, for example, said:

English used to be something like a punishment in the beginning. I didn't understand what the teacher was saying. However, she does make an effort; she tries using Kinyarwanda in a way that we can understand, and she uses pictures and stories to support her explanations. That interested me. Now I like to read and interpret, and thus to write in English. (Student 4, Interview)

The above excerpt shows that the student's case is just a small sample of the challenges of teaching English in a multilingual district like Rwanda, where many students have very little English knowledge when they start. How her teacher's use of Kinyarwanda to scaffold her learning, combined with visual and narrative strategies in those instances, flipped her from disengagement to intrinsic motivation to learn. She highlights the importance of context-sensitive instruction modes, especially in rural, low-bandwidth schools.

All students agreed that a positive teacher-student relationship was an essential component for their motivation to learn English. Teachers figured prominently in transforming students' engagement and goal orientation through affective support, mentorship, inclusive Pedagogy, or contextual pedagogy.

## Discussion

This research confirmed the hypothesis that teacher-student interactions significantly enhance student motivation in English language classes in Rwanda. The findings show that emotional support, mutual respect, and teacher enthusiasm are critical in sustaining students' willingness to engage in language learning. Motivation, therefore, is not only the result of instructional delivery but also emerges from relational and emotional commitments that give students a sense of safety and belonging.

The results are perfectly in line with the Self-Determination Theory, which highlights autonomy, competence, and relatedness as the foundations of motivation (Deci & Ryan, 1985) compared to the previous literature. They also support the L2 Motivational Self System (Dornyei, 2019), whereby the learners envision themselves as an effective language user. Nevertheless, the study expands upon previous research by situating evidence within a Rwandan context where the passion, emotional openness, and mentoring strategies of the teacher converted fear and anxiety into intrinsic motivation in the students. This is different from the previous research in the context of multilingual African environments, which primarily focused on structural or policy issues as opposed to relational practices (Bamuhiga & Kimambo, 2025; Sibomana, 2022). The evidence is also aligned with Wang (2023) and Alrabai and Algazzaz (2024), who believe that emotional teacher support increases student confidence and readiness to use language. However, this paper also notes that in post-colonial classrooms in Rwanda, where English is a second or foreign language, relationship-building should also address the issues of linguistic diversity and limited resources. Thus, the current findings bridge global theories with the realities of a resource-constrained, multilingual African context.

Interactive methods of teaching become essential. The motivation of students is strong through group work, peer discussions, and collaborative activities. They coincide with the interaction-oriented model of Dornyei and Ushioda (Lamb et al., 2020), which emphasises dialogue and cooperation as central to language learning. Nevertheless, such strategies are broadly suggested in the international literature, yet, in Rwanda, large classes, as well as different cultural characteristics of communication tendencies, determine their effectiveness, which both agrees with previous studies and contradicts them.

Another point raised in the study is the balance between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. In line with Deci and Ryan (1985), an intrinsic motivation was demonstrated to flourish in highly supportive relationships, whereas overdependence on extrinsic rewards jeopardised intrinsic engagement. The other important factor is mentorship. The results support Wiraningsih and Santosa (2020) in their focus on the significance of teacher mentoring and emotional care. Students who receive personal direction outside of the classroom are more confident and persistent in their learning. This is a relatively unexplored area of mentorship as far as Rwandan EFL research is concerned, so this element is a new contribution of this study.

Teachers also shared many difficulties in encouraging learners. Relational teaching was hampered by overcrowded classes, a lack of learning materials, and administrative workloads. Such systemic problems reflect other African situations (Bamuhiga & Kimambo, 2025) but are especially urgent in Rwanda because the linguistic diversity aggravates classroom management challenges. Thus, while teacher-student interaction is shown to be a strong motivational driver, its impact is constrained by institutional barriers that require broader policy attention. Meanwhile, the students' voices in this study supported the centrality of empathy, availability, and creativity among teachers. Students valued positive relationships, acceptance of errors, and personalised instruction, which turned fear into passion and frustration into motivation. Such views resonate with (Velasquez et al., 2013), who discovered that nurturing pedagogy develops a deeper love of learning. However, the present study introduces the lens of Rwandan multilingual classrooms, in which such relational practices are not only advantageous but also crucial to fair participation.

In the case of policy, the findings indicate that professional development initiatives in Rwanda ought to focus on relational approaches to teaching, rather than only on subject knowledge. In practice, the study focuses on the idea that to ensure that the motivation in linguistically diverse classrooms is maintained, teachers should be trained in empathy, mentoring, and culturally responsive pedagogy. In the case of research, the investigation that is proposed is the necessity to investigate the impact of culture on teacher-student relationships, in particular, how multilingualism affects motivation.

To end, the current study demonstrates that Rwandan EFL classrooms flourish when teachers combine emotional support with academic instruction, create safe environments to make mistakes, and create interactive and collaborative tasks. The teachers should strike a balance between intrinsic and extrinsic motivators and instill the practice of mentorship that will empower the students to be persistent. Inclusion and cultural sensitivity in classrooms should

be taken seriously so that every learner, no matter their background, feels appreciated and competent. In addition, the study shows that the relationship between teachers and students is a conclusive determinant in the motivation of students in Rwandan EFL classrooms. By connecting relational practices with established theories and situating them in the specific challenges of Rwanda, the findings offer practical strategies, theoretical insights, and policy directions that can guide future improvements in language education.

## Conclusion

This study set out to examine how teacher-student interactions in Rwandan secondary EFL classrooms influence student motivation. It also aims to comprehend the influence of emotional support, respect, and teacher enthusiasm on the intrinsic and extrinsic motivation of learners in a multilingual setting where English is used as a foreign language. The results indicate that good relationships between teachers and students contribute to willingness to attend to it, decrease fear of errors, and promote learning perseverance among students learning English. Passion, humility, and availability enable teachers to generate conducive and positive learning environments that foster motivation. Similarly, the students stated that motivation, positive criticism, and mentoring help build confidence and interest in English. These results lead to the fact that motivation in Rwanda is not entirely academic but rather relational, as it is characterized by empathy, creativity, and cultural sensitivity.

The study contributes to theory and practice by linking Self-Determination Theory and the L2 Motivational Self System with the realities of resource-limited multilingual classrooms. In practice, this implies that professional development programs must provide teachers with relational and culturally responsive practice, rather than knowledge on subjects. These findings can also be relevant to policymakers as they develop training programs that will focus on the relational aspects of teaching that are key to maintaining the engagement of learners in Rwanda.

Though this research gives significant insight into the perception of teachers and students on the use of language in classrooms, the research has its limitations. The small sample size (ten teachers and four students) and qualitative design restrict the generalizability of the results. Further, the research was limited to a single district (Gicumbi), which might not reflect the classroom situation in Rwanda. Lastly, the use of interviews depends only on reported perceptions of the participants and not on the observed practices. Research in the future should thus consider mixed methods, use a bigger and more diverse sample, and classroom observations to improve validity and generalisation.

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