



## **Religious missionary life abroad and English-speaking motivation among Canossian Sisters: A phenomenological study**

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### **Abstract**

While there is considerable research on the motivation to learn and speak English among students and teachers, there is little research on the motivation to speak English among religious women living in another country. This study aimed to investigate the lived experiences of four Timorese Canossian Sisters, three of whom are currently living in the Philippines, and one lived there years ago. A phenomenological design was employed to capture the lived experiences of the participants and to understand how they navigated their new environment relating to language, culture, and mission. Data were collected through self-reflective narratives and focus group discussions, and were analysed thematically. The findings show that participants' motivation to speak English evolved from obligation and compliance to intrinsic and integrative motivation, which in turn helped them overcome personal insecurities such as language anxiety and shyness. Community encouragement, cultural adaptation, religious missions, self-belief, and peer support contributed to this change. This research implies creating an environment that supports religious communities, identifies sensitive practices, and mediates social learning to increase learners' speaking motivation in various cultural and faith-based contexts. It contributes to the literature on second language motivation in relation to religious life and transnationalism.

**Keywords:** Canossian Sisters, faith-based context, intercultural living, phenomenological study, second language motivation

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## Introduction

In contemporary society, English is increasingly used as a lingua franca, including in business, international cooperation, education, and industry (Zulkarnain & Widiati, 2023). The Canossian Sisters engage internationally in multilingual environments that require English as a common language of Mission activities, oral presentations, and intercultural exchange (Farrah & Al-Bakri, 2020; Khonamri et al., 2021a; Namaziandost et al., 2023). Studies have previously examined the relationship between religiosity and motivation in language learning. Fernández and Hanlin (1996) explored the religious motivation and personality traits and concluded that trust, empathy, and extraversion were related to the amount of religious motivation. This investigation proves that motivation is often influenced by spiritual and religious aspects that enhance learners' positive attitudes and willingness to converse in English (Ariani, 2021; Farid et al., 2021; Sarwari et al., 2024). Once the student engages in the process of learning, there may be obstacles that demotivate them (Mbato, 2023; Diasti & Mbato, 2020). Consequently, English is viewed not only as a global communication with the Muslim community but also as an instrument of religious propagation (Da'wah) (Farid et al., 2021). While English is important, little is known about how religious people, particularly those living abroad, develop their skills and motivation to use English as a foreign language (EFL).

This is a crucial gap in second language acquisition (SLA), particularly regarding women's religious motivational experiences. Although language learning is a cognitive act in multilingual, faith-based settings, a person's motivation is deeply personal and spiritual, oriented by identity (Phelan, 2000), mission, and self (Kabilan et al., 2020; Lian et al., 2025; Widiarti et al., 2022). Living abroad offers transformative opportunities for language learning, shifting learners' motivation from extrinsic, toward intrinsic and integrative (Baker, 2011; Larsari et al., 2022). These experiences transform the individual from an imposed obligation into an autonomous, communal, pastoral service and self-expression within a missionary context (Ćirković-Miladinović et al., 2021).

The modern view of motivations as a dynamic process shaped by sociocultural factors (Abduh, 2021; Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2021; Sadeghi & Navaie, 2021). Research confirms that interpreting different cultures and faiths related to society, culture that affects people's motivation in learning and using a language (see Arsyad et al., 2020; Gauvain, 2008; Khonamri et al., 2021b). Consequently, the transnational and community life in another country offers a significant learning environment to the Sisters to develop their motivation to speak English. Farrah and Halahlah (2020) and Kabilan et al. (2020) described the authentic, social experience that gives learners agency and self-purpose. To respond to this gap, the current research explores the relationship between living in a foreign culture and the motivation to speak. Rooted in Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory (SCT) (Gauvain, 2008; Kozulin, 2002) and Self-Determination Theory (SDT) (Deci & Ryan, 1985), the present research considers how interculturality, mission, and lived experiences influence motivation within faith-based communities.

Employing a qualitative phenomenological approach, the study aims at exploring the lived experience of the Sisters regarding language, identity (Phelan, 2000), and faith in intercultural contexts (Ellis, 2025). Current insights in education research advocate for context-responsive, value-based language programs that honor learners' identities, feelings, and purposes (Lamb & Arisandy, 2020; Mercer et al., 2025). The study also aims to inform the design of a more holistic and purposeful conception of language learning that incorporates spirituality, vocation, and intercultural experiences in a faith-based context and facilitates transformative self-development (Kubanyiova, 2022).

This research is unique in that it analyzes religious women who are underrepresented in English-language motivation within SLA research. To date, there have been many studies on learner motivation in academic and professional contexts (Lamb et al., 2021; Papi, 2021). These studies do not fully capture the distinctive realities of missionary life where language learning is closely connected to faith, vocation, mission, and service. Despite its small sample size, this study suggests a direction for future research to broaden existing understandings into the socio-cultural and spiritual dimensions of SLA, specifically to address the following question: "How does living in a foreign country affect the Canossian Sisters' motivation to speak English?"

## Literature review

### *EFL learners' motivation to learn English: From static to dynamic perspectives*

Deci and Ryan's (1985) Self-Determination Theory (SDT) states that fulfilling basic psychological needs significantly enhances intrinsic motivation in language

learning. Gardner and Lambert (1972) clearly show that integrative motivation is associated with the sincere desire to integrate into the culture and community of the target language. Gardner et al. (1985) also discussed the attitudes and emphasized the importance of motivation in second language learning and determined through the lens of either instrumental or integrative orientation whereas the contemporary body of literature presents motivation as being dynamic and responsive to context, influenced by relevant identity, emotion, and sociocultural aspects (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2021; Henry et al., 2019; Henry & Lamb, 2020). Similarly, in their research, Ndayisenga and Mbato (2024) demonstrated that motivation among Rwandan EFL learners was a combination of the integrative and instrumental orientations, due to their situational exposure and interaction within their communities. The study also revealed that no motivational construct is transferable across contexts (Ndayisenga & Mbato, 2024). Moreover, Sadeghi and Navaie (2021) illustrated how learners' mindsets have evolved in relation to language, and their beliefs about their ability to change, demonstrating evidence of the connection between cognition and effect. Similarly, Miftah and Cahyono (2022) found that technologies utilized in collaborative contexts like Edmodo Learning Management System (ELMS) help build positive learner affect and engagement in EFL writing contexts. Intrinsic motivation, in addition to external affirmation from sociocultural contexts, such as teacher support, positive feedback, and collaboration, has built learners' self-efficacy in speaking English (Setiawan et al., 2025).

### *Sociocultural mediation and identity in language learning*

Using Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory (SCT), 1978, as a foundation, motivation is acknowledged as a tool for a socially mediated process (Gauvain, 2008). Cultural context, interaction, and participation collaboratively construct identity and learning (Lantolf et al., 2020; Phelan, 2000; Swain & King, 2022). However, language learning can only happen through meaningful engagement in communities and influence self-perceptions, and not in isolation. Zulkarnain and Widiati (2023) proved that learners' identities, particularly self-efficacy and confidence, are often constructed through social validation and group participation. Kabilan et al. (2020) synthesized issues of cultural understanding with teacher education practicum through cross-cultural exchange with multilingual teachers. Similarly, Ndayisenga and Mbato (2024) found that learners' sense of community membership is related to their persistence and willingness to communicate. Oyserman (2024) points out that the self and identity are both individual and social constructs, and this idea is supported by

Horowitz et al. (2018), who stated that identity is a motivation for engagement in religious and mission contexts.

### *Integrating SDT within faith-based learning contexts*

Although SCT relates motivation to social participation (Kozulin, 2002), SDT articulates how social participation leads to internalized, self-guided motivation and suggests that intrinsic motivation thrives when the psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness are satisfied (Deci & Ryan, 2020; Masoabi & Alexander, 2021; Ryan & Deci, 2020). With autonomy-supportive conditions, persistence and performance were routinely enhanced (Mercer & Ryan, 2021; Mercer et al., 2025; Papi & Khajavy, 2021, 2023). Moreover, external support is vital for self-efficacy and meaningful engagement (Setiawan et al., 2025). Hendricks (2024) concurs that internal motivation sustains resilience and commitment. Autonomy becomes the freedom to pursue a spiritual mission connected to divinity, and deeply tied to faith, evangelization, and intercultural dialogue (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2020). Ultimately, effective pedagogies increase students' motivation and speaking abilities, facilitate engagement and interactions (Miftah & Cahyono, 2022).

Meanwhile, relatedness signifies the profound sense of connection with a global religious community, which is essential to a sense of belonging among communal members (Babayiğit & Çelik, 2025; Palabiyik & Oral, 2022). Although studies about SDT in religious contexts are limited, recent studies (Kabilan et al., 2020; Widiati et al., 2021) concluded that spiritual purpose enhances self-determination, where learners view language as both an academic and sacred activity.

### *Spirituality, intercultural experience, and faith-based motivation*

Spirituality is understood as the pursuit of connection and transcendence, which often provokes a shift in learning from an academic pursuit to a moral and existential dimension (Lian et al., 2025; Nguyen et al., 2022). Studies indicate that motivation is amplified when learning connects personally or resonates with collective belonging (Mbato, 2023; Ndayisenga & Mbato, 2024; Widiati et al., 2021). In multicultural religious communities, language has a role as a medium of communion and fostering solidarity (Arsyad et al., 2020; Ćirković-Miladinović et al., 2021). Studies in the area of faith-based language use and intercultural missionary contexts are very limited. However, disposition, such as confidence (Zulkarnain & Widiati, 2023), self-efficacy (Setiawan et al., 2025), and a growth mindset (Sadeghi & Navaie, 2021) are well-established.

Building upon the above theoretical and empirical insights, the study adopts an integrative phenomenological design to indicate that motivation in a second language can be understood as socially mediated and self-regulated, but not much is known about motivation in faith-based and intercultural communities. Therefore, to fill this gap, the study looks at the lived experiences of the Canossian Sisters in learning and using English in a cross-cultural ministry. We made an investigation to identify how sociocultural participation and self-determined development are textualized in the Sisters' lives.

## **Method**

### *Research design*

Utilizing a qualitative phenomenological design (Rittmann & Mpofu, 2024; Saldana, 2011), this study examined the shared lived experiences of the Canossian Sisters living abroad. This is the most suitable design to capture the participants' lived experiences in a specific socio-cultural context (Peña, 2024; Rittmann & Mpofu, 2024). The qualitative phenomenological method originated with Husserl (2012); its modern application by Van Manen (2016) provides the necessary framework to uncover the meanings of lived experiences within the socio-cultural context. The goal of using this method is to understand motivation as a non-static variable, but a dynamic phenomenon shaped by the religious identity and missionary vocation (Phelan, 2000). The lens of phenomenology also encourages personal reflection, identity development, and internal motivation as essential dimensions that are difficult to quantify without losing their experiential essence (Creswell, 2013).

### *Participants*

The current study involved four Canossian Sisters from Timor-Leste, in the context of data collection; three Sisters, as the research participants, were living in the San Juan Community in Manila, Philippines, and one was previously living there for her religious formation mission. A purposive sampling technique (Patton, 2015) was used for the study. This method aligns with the qualitative exploratory of purposive sampling to select a smaller, focused sample based on specific criteria relevant to the research question, as a means to deeply understand the phenomenon, rather than generalizability (Rittmann & Mpofu, 2024). The participants were recruited based on the criteria: They had direct lived experience and ongoing completed process of learning English; they previously shared an intercultural setting in San Juan Community in Manila, member of Canossian Congregation originally from Timor-Leste; they actively involved in

their religious formation; and they were missionary service during their time in the Philippines and show a strong ability to personally reflect on how their missionary experiences shaped their motivation to learn and speak English.

In line with a qualitative and phenomenological approach, where global generalizability is not the goal, this study focused on the depth and richness of the experience, rather than on the big sample size. As Dörnyei (2007) points out, small yet homogeneous samples in qualitative second language acquisition (SLA) research allowed for richer examination of contextual and motivational variables. The participants were informed about the objectives of the study, their voluntary participation, and consent before the data collection was conducted. All participants or Sisters (Participants 1 to 4) unanimously agreed that the data would be used for the study and kept confidential. Table 1 presents the demographic data of the participants.

**Table 1**

*The participants' demographic data*

Participants or Sisters	Gender	Age (years)	English exposure (years)	As Sisters (years)
Participant 1	Female	30	2	3
Participant 2	Female	30	2	3
Participant 3	Female	31	3	>4
Participant 4	Female	51	5	>10

### *Data collection*

The first primary data collection tool was the in-depth semi-structured interview, self-reflective narratives, and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) to examine the meanings and depths of participants' subjectivity, including their thinking and internal thought processes (Morea et al., 2023; Patton, 2015; Solhi & Thumvichit, 2025). The data collection procedure was employed to capture the lived experiences of the Sisters living abroad and engaging in missionary services, and how these experiences impact their motivation to speak English. The Sisters were encouraged to connect their own experiences of learning a language and living out a mission abroad with how the language barriers presented obstacles, which either strengthened or challenged their motivation to use English. Participants' self-reflective narratives were used as an additional source of data that provided a deeper understanding of each participant's ability to navigate through the difficulties associated with learning a language and their commitment to succeed in their ministries. The self-reflective narratives were

used only as descriptive data to support phenomenological meaning-making and were not used for a specific purpose or as a method of narrative inquiry. Using multiple phenomenological principles, including bracketing to lessen bias, and data saturation of collected data to enable the essence of lived experiences of the Sisters as identified through phenomenology (Fadil et al., 2026; McNarry et al., 2019; Pool, 2018). As mentioned, the participants share their experiences with living abroad. All forms of data were collected virtually through Google Forms for reflective narratives and online interviews, allowing participants to respond to the questions flexibly at their own pace. They also shared their personal journey of living abroad. This instrument was created to be used for a duration of 2-3 weeks, prompting the participants to self-reflect honestly and freely regarding their motivation in a safe and self-reflective way (Barkhuizen et al., 2024). Participants were encouraged to share moments of success, struggle, cultural adjustment, language anxiety, and how their reasons for using English changed (Ellis, 2025).

The second main primary method of data collection was FGDs, which focused on collecting in-depth information regarding experiences, opinions, values, or beliefs (Saldana, 2011; Solodka, 2024). The FGDs were conducted twice virtually, with all participants involved. Each session lasted approximately 60 – 75 minutes and was guided by a semi-structured discussion guide. Through this session, participants can discuss their personal views (Madkur, 2025), which allows for a broader range of responses than conducting interviews on an individual basis (Cohen-Scali et al., 2018). Canossian Sisters' participation in the FGDs would be particularly valuable in having rich and different perspectives that would improve the data triangulation and deepen the understanding of themes present within reflective narratives (Magabe et al., 2025; Rittmann & Mpofu, 2024). The FGDs were held via a WhatsApp call and were conducted in a combination of English and Tetum (the national language of participants) to enable rich expression and deeper meaning-making. When allowed to speak in their first language, participants experience authentic engagement and have the chance to avoid the “loss of meaning”, particularly in intercultural and diasporic contexts (Kramsch, 2014; Temple & Young, 2004). The discussion was audio-recorded and transcribed for the thematic analysis. It is a technical step of the process of familiarization, immersion, and interpretation of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

### ***Data analysis***

The data analysis was done through a thematic analysis following the six-phase method proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006) as follows: Familiarizing with the

data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. This method was applied to understand the lived experiences influencing the motivation of Canossian Sisters to learn and use the English language in a new cultural and missionary setting. Audio-recorder interviews and focus group discussions were transcribed verbatim, and self-narrative reflections were compiled as textual data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). We transcribed interview data and reread multiple times to achieve immersion in the data. In this phase, we captured recurrent patterns, shared meanings, and thematic organization across participants' accounts. Data derived through a phenomenological qualitative study emphasizes the way individuals make sense of their lived experience (Creswell & Poth, 2016).

We began our data analysis using a line-by-line coding scheme (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The initial coding was developed through an inductive approach. In this stage, we identified the quotes or segments from participants' shared experiences that represent the way participants assert themselves as being motivated. These initial codes were organized into larger thematic categories related to extrinsic and intrinsic motivation, identity transformation, community support, language anxiety, and adjustment (Phelan, 2000).

An inductive approach was used to identify the patterns and similarities present across the multiple sources of data that were gathered (interviews, along with pertinent literature) to analyse the data as a collective whole. The deductive research methodology, which is the examination of multiple types of sources of data through the established theories of SLA motivations and the L2 Motivational Self-System (Dörnyei, 2009). The process of analysis consisted of several phases of comparison, group sharing, discussion and feedback, or developing themes based on both thematic and overall categories to create a more complete picture of how psychological, social, and spiritual factors influenced the motivation of the Canossian Sisters to learn and use English in an international missionary setting. Table 2 shows a representative data sample, along with corresponding codes and potential themes.

### *Trustworthiness*

The trustworthiness of the present study was verified with Shenton's (2004) framework, focusing on credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. To ensure credibility, we utilized triangulation by combining interviews, self-reflective narratives, and focus group discussions with the four Sisters. Crucially, we implemented member checking (Shenton, 2004) by returning the interview transcripts and preliminary thematic summaries to the Sisters. This allowed them to verify that the interpretations of their "missionary

vocation” and “Timorese identity” were accurate, ensuring the data reflected their actual lived experiences rather than research bias (Phelan, 2000).

**Table 2**

*Example of the coding process*

Data extract	Code	Potential theme
<i>Ever since I came to the Philippines, my motivation to speak English has improved.</i> (Participant 1, Interview)	Increased motivation over time	Development of English-speaking motivation
<i>With more practice, I have become more confident.</i> (Participant 2, Interview)	Growing confidence through practice	Development of English-speaking motivation
<i>My Sisters encouraged me to keep trying.</i> (Participant 3, Interview)	Peer support	Religious Community Influences on English-speaking motivation
<i>By doing my mission, I feel connected with others, which motivates me to speak English.</i> (Participant 4, Interview)	Social connection	Missionary works ' influence on English-speaking motivation

In addition to triangulation, we used the self-reflective journals to record participants' experiences (Richards, 2015). Additionally, transferability provides rich contextual descriptions of experiences of the Canossian Sisters in relation to their cultural and/or spiritual backgrounds. The authors enhanced the dependability of the research findings by being transparent about their research processes and by developing a detailed audit trail documenting every stage of the research process (Richards, 2015). To minimise the bias, we conducted conformability through reflexivity and systematic analysis. It also established the confirmability by ensuring that participants' narratives were based upon the participants' personal experiences. To enhance the validity and minimize research bias, we served as facilitators rather than instructors, and encouraged open reflection in a democratic and dialogic way, in a non-intrusive facilitation (Herr & Anderson, 2005; Miles & Huberman, 1994). Maintaining trustworthiness, as previously presented, also served us as both a measure of rigor and as an effort to minimize bias (Mbato, 2023).

## Findings

The results of this study are primarily derived from the participants' shared experience gathered through in-depth semi-structured interviews, self-reflective narratives, and the Focus Group Discussions (FGDs). The interviews were

designed to obtain detailed descriptions of the intersection between the participants' vocation and their use of English in a foreign missionary context. Through open-ended prompts, participants were encouraged to reflect and share their feelings, concerns, and the shift in their motivation related to speaking English as part of their daily missionary life. We utilized secondary sources of information, such as self-reflective narratives and shared lived experiences from FGDs, to strengthen their analysis and findings. The Insights gathered from semi-structured interviews and supplementary sources identified that the development of the Sisters' English-speaking abilities influenced their motivation to learn more about the language. In addition to the Language acquisition component of the participants' experience when living abroad, there was also their experience of developing self-confidence and a sense of belongingness to a greater community, and establishing a stronger commitment to their goals and aspirations. The next section of this report highlights eight key findings derived from the Sisters' collective experience of learning English and living in the Philippines that provide evidence of their emotional, social, and spiritual transformations.

### ***Strengthened motivation to speak English***

Participants consistently stated in the interviews that their initial experience of speaking English during their Missionary service in the Philippines shifted from being anxious to meaningful means, specifically with those they encountered in their daily apostolic and community interactions. The data below indicates a transformation from an emotional to a spiritual dimension. One participant shared:

Ever since I came to the Philippines, I realized that my motivation to speak English has improved. Initially, I was afraid to speak English because I was worried about my limited vocabulary and making mistakes. During meetings and sharing sessions, I preferred to listen rather than speak. (Participant 1, Interview)

As participants continued to speak English in there, the interviews revealed that repeated exposure and necessity gradually reduced fear and encouraged risk-taking. One participant acknowledged:

Initially, I felt doubtful and hesitant to speak English because of my limited vocabulary, but I tried to practice. The more I practiced, the more comfortable I became. I learned that it was important to try to communicate in English. When others understood me, I became more confident. (Participant 3, Interview)

The above excerpt highlights that the willingness to learn English by each participant was also tied to their religious vocation and sense of mission. As such, the process of speaking English was considered a way to uphold the religious calling and carry out the mission. One participant shared:

I could engage and serve better in my mission here in the Philippines because my ability to speak English improved as I kept practicing. When I speak English, I can share, listen, and understand others. I enjoy this process, and it allows me to continue speaking English, even when it is difficult. (Participant 2, Interview)

As indicated in the above excerpt, it manifests that generally, no participants expressed a decline in motivation, hence suggesting that cultural immersion contributes positively to the development of motivation.

### *Positive influences on motivation*

A strong sense of support was evident for each of the Sisters from their religious community, and most obviously from their fellow Sisters. Participants' awareness of their community's support as one of the strongest positive influences on motivation was clearly expressed in the interviews. This communal support makes their learning more significant and motivated. The following data revealed a transformation from the social to a more emotional dimension. One participant articulated:

I felt supported by my Sisters in the community; they encouraged me to keep trying whenever I felt anxious, and they also reminded me not to give up, even though I make mistakes. This inspired me to keep trying. (Participant 1, Interview)

The above excerpt suggests that communal support is the main aspect of the Sisters' motivation. moving from being an opportunity for social interaction to becoming an important emotional support. Thereby reducing the fear of failure through the motivation received from others. Another participant said:

Feeling connected with other people motivates me to learn and speak English, even though my ability to speak English is still poor; engaging and interacting with people around me makes me feel supported to practice my English-speaking skills. (Participant 4, Self-reflective Narrative)

The excerpt above indicates that motivation to learn and speak English is not simply a person's own progress, but rather a community effort in the process of language acquisition. No participants reported a negative impact on their

motivation to learn English from outside sources while in the Philippines, but instead, they have reported being motivated, accepted, and understood.

### *Enjoyment in speaking English*

Data showed that there are gradual changes in emotional feelings about using the English language: from initial anxiety to enjoyment. As learners gained fluency in learning to speak English, they began to associate positive feelings and enjoyment with speaking English. The following data demonstrates this transformation across all three dimensions of experience: emotional, social, and spiritual. One participant stated:

I now find that I enjoy speaking in English. I used to be hesitant when I spoke English, but as I continued to practice, I began to be more confident. I discovered that speaking in English allows me to connect with others in different settings. I will use English in all my interactions with others, regardless of the situation, because every time I practice, I learn and grow in confidence to communicate. (Participant 1, Interview)

The excerpt above indicates that language-learning experience shifted from an initial fear of communicating in English to an overall feeling of enjoyment as the Sisters gained their proficiency in English language skills. Therefore, the joy of connecting is greater than the fear of being wrong. Likewise, one of the participants expressed the same experiences concerning how the transition from initial struggles to ease and enjoyment in everyday communication:

At first, when I was attempting to communicate in English, it was difficult, and I often felt doubtful. As I've practiced speaking English with friends and co-workers, I find it to be very enjoyable because I am using the English language in everyday life, having conversations or meeting with people in my ministry. (Participant 4, FGDs)

The above excerpt shows that the emotional change shown through the data illustrates that learning English is not just something done for a purpose, but it has also become a way in which each participant reflects who they are and sees learning English as a part of their everyday life. This shows that the English language is now part of the identity of the Sisters as English speakers within their missionary context.

### *Overcoming anxiety and discouragement*

Participants said they experienced a primarily positive experience; however, many also indicated that they felt challenged by the process of learning another

language, especially during the initial stages. Through interviews and focus group discussions, participants mentioned that they experienced a degree of self-doubt and/or fear of making mistakes; however, they were able to embrace challenges as part of their personal development and language acquisition. The data reflects a transformation from the emotional experience to the spiritual dimension, indicating a deeper, multiple meaning. One participant shared:

Mistakes are part of my growth as a person, so I remind myself of that every time I have made a mistake; when I am trying to work through feelings of being discouraged, I try to accept the mistakes rather than feel embarrassed about making them - this strategy has allowed me to continue talking regardless of how difficult I find it to speak English, be calm and stay focused. (Participant 3, FGDs)

The data demonstrates that the participants' early stages in learning English were full of self-doubt and fear of making mistakes; however, as they managed to cope with these challenges, they experienced a self-transformation and started to view mistakes as failures, instead of seeing them as integral parts of the process. Another participant reflected:

I am a little anxious about my performance, so I keep telling myself to perform to the best of my abilities, and that doing this will help me improve when I put in my best effort. (Participant 2, Self-reflective Narrative)

As shared in the above excerpt, the finding contributes to the validation of the theme on the shift in mindset where mistakes were embraced as opportunities for growth and improvement rather than failure and discouragement. This cognitive and emotional reframing was considered a foundation to maintain long-term motivation and resilience in language learning.

### *The role of community and peer support*

The participants saw that emotional inspiration and moral assistance from the Sisters' communities/brotherhood are fundamental in using the language as a language development resource. The data provide evidence for a transition from social relationships to emotional entanglement, as indicated by the following excerpts. One participant shared in her self-reflective narratives.

My Sisters, who are part of the community as well as many of the friends I make who speak English well, have been there to help me throughout my life. I have friends and relatives, most often my Sisters, who listen to me when I am having problems trying to communicate in the English language. By doing this, I am

trying more often, and I will continue trying. (Participant 1, Self-reflective Narrative)

The data highlight that the religious community serves as a foundation for language development. The emotional inspiration and moral support are considered fundamental factors that support participants' continuing use of English. Being heard by others creates relational accountability and fosters enduring motivation to continue trying. Similarly, another participant shared:

My community Sister in love offers me ongoing encouragement alongside thoughtful responses whenever I have questions of clarity, allowing me to grow and develop into a better person. (Participant 2, Interview)

As expressed in the above excerpt, it shows that motivation can be considered intrinsic and socially constructed, both of which are shaped through communal learning and collaborative relationship practices. Thus, the essence of English learning is learned from daily social interaction, which supports motivation through a sense of belonging and mutual collaboration within a community.

### *Influence of faith, mission, and religious life*

All of the participants expressed the belief that their spirituality motivated them. Many indicated that their sense of vocation and mission also provided them with a powerful purpose to study English. All participants indicated that English is not just a language that one learns, but a means of connecting with others in their apostolic missions. The data below presents a spiritual transformation, where challenges are embraced as part of the spiritual journey. One Sister stated:

I am motivated to learn English as a result of my mission in life, which allows me to connect with other people. Speaking English allows me to develop relationships and, most importantly, it allows me to live out my mission. When I speak English, I am doing what I was called to do and can serve those who are around me. (Participant 4, Interview)

These excerpts show that English language acquisition is linked with the theological and vocational dimensions. Participants identified English as a sacred instrument through which they accomplish their apostolic mission of connecting with others. A Sister stated:

My spirituality gives me motivation to continue studying English and using it. When I communicate with people, I meet during my mission program, which adds purpose and value to my relationship with them. When I communicate with others, I feel like I live my faith and mission. (Participant 1, Interview)

The excerpt presented above demonstrates that the motivations of both Sisters indicate their relationship with God. In fact, the research supports this conclusion. When they have the opportunity to use the English language, it facilitates their ability to connect with God, to deepen their vocation, and to build relationships with one another.

### *Personal reflections and insights*

As indicated by both interviews and self-reflective narratives, all participants stated that they have personally developed through language acquisition by gaining self-esteem, realizing a sense of achievement, and redefining their relationship with learning a second language. The data below demonstrates a transformation in the spiritual dimension, marked by deeper meaning-making and inner growth. One participant noted in her self-reflective narrative:

In reflection, I believe that my existing motivation for connecting through the English language has developed deeper over time. The English language enables me to be more confident when I communicate with others than ever before because of how it creates connections between people. Now, I can express my feelings with greater confidence than I did before. (Participant 2, Self-reflective Narrative)

The excerpts above highlight that language challenges are means of exercising personal agency and self-identity development. It is not just about linguistics, but also spirituality, and consequently, redefines the participants' connection to their own voice. The data demonstrate that increasing proficiency in English not only develops participants' self-confidence but also their personal growth as well. Another participant shared:

When looking back at my experience of learning and speaking English, I have noticed that it is getting easier to speak English. I choose to engage in conversations in English because it allows me to communicate with more people and make lasting friendships with those people. (Participant 4, Interview)

The above data excerpt shows how their experiences helped not only in their language learning but also in their development and ability to be resilient. This process allowed for increased levels of self-awareness and engagement with the challenges of day-to-day living. In turn, this process allowed for a greater integration of themselves as individuals from many different cultures and ultimately allowed for more confidence in establishing relationships and communicating with other cultures.

### *Advice for new learners*

Based on their own experience of being a missionary and living away from home, the respondents provided guidance to other Sisters who might be beginning their own journeys of language acquisition. The data below emphasizes an emotional transformation in which participants became self-motivated to advise and support others. One participant advised:

I would like to encourage my fellow Sisters and language learners not to be afraid; instead, keep trying even if it means making mistakes, and each mistake is part of the learning process. Thinking this way helps me continue without feeling discouraged, make progress, and every mistake is part of the process. (Participant 4, FGDs)

The excerpts above present that participants' experiences allow them to make a generative change that transforms individual challenges into shared knowledge and support for others. Participants view errors as part of the journey and go from being receivers of support to being providers of motivation for others who are on the same path of learning. Another participant also recommended:

I always remind myself to keep going and not to be afraid of asking people around; therefore, I would like to suggest to my fellow language learners to just keep going and not be afraid to ask people around for help. Asking for help makes learning feel less heavy and more manageable. (Participant 3, Interview)

The above excerpt suggests promoting a humanistic and learner-centered approach to language learning that prioritizes process over perfection. From the standpoint of the phenomenological perspective, the learning process occurs through one's interaction with real circumstances, relations between people, and their ability to communicate in their daily lives. Participants' advice enables their fellow language learners to see challenges as a natural part of the process of becoming empowered and self-sufficient users of the language.

### **Discussion**

This section greatly elaborated on how the Sisters' or Participants' experiences in another country impacted their desire to use and speak English, which came through the eight emergent themes from the findings, which suggested a close relationship to the psychological, spiritual, and social aspects. This movement creates an opportunity for English language learning to shift from an obligation to a more personal and community-oriented, fulfilling both a communal mission and a personal calling. According to the findings based on the applicable frameworks of Self-Determination Theory (SDT) (Deci & Ryan, 1985, 2020) and

Sociocultural Theory (SCT) (Gauvain, 2008; Kozulin, 2002), the participants' desire to meaningfully communicate in English reflected their belief in the necessity of autonomy and competence for sustaining intrinsic motivation (Deci et al., 2017; Masoabi & Alexander, 2021).

The enjoyment of speaking English not only created connections to others but also valued personal growth in the broader society. This supports Gardner et al.'s (1985) assertion that integrative motivation provides an alternative method of socializing with peers, offering a positive learning experience in an encouraging learning environment (Ndyasenga & Mbato, 2024; Zulkarnain & Widiati, 2023).

SCT is seen as the model to understand community support (Gauvain, 2008; Kozulin, 2002; Lantolf et al., 2020). This social mediation resulted in participants' motivation shifting from extrinsic compliance to intrinsic engagement (Setiawan et al., 2025), which further built self-efficacy and created positive affective orientations toward learning (Miftah & Cahyono, 2022; Swain & King, 2022). The transition from the initial self-doubt and anxiety to enjoyment is an important emotion-based change. This change manifested as engagement, which is optimal for intrinsic motivation (Deci et al., 2017). Enjoyment satisfies the L2 Motivational Self System (Dörnyei, 2009) and facilitates spiritual well-being that results from language use (Nguyen et al., 2022).

Participants showed their resilience and growth mindset (Sadeghi & Navaie, 2021) as they experienced early anxiety through the advantages of self-affirmation and accepting mistakes. Participants expressed their reflective identity (Zimmerman, 2016) as a foundation for self-regulated motivation. Their emphasis on mistakes as an opportunity to learn aligned with Vygotsky's theory of internal dialogue and emotional management in an intercultural context (Gauvain, 2008). The group dynamic was also a critical consideration in sustaining the idea of relational motivation (Mercer, 2021; Mercer et al., 2025). In their faith-based framework, the idea of learning together took on an even larger spiritual dimension that was shown as a community calling effort rather than an individual endeavour, and knowledge, including religious wisdom, was co-constructed socially (Gauvain, 2008; Lantolf et al., 2020).

The aspects of motivation in relation to the participants' spiritual life were connected to a religious vocation that brought significant meaning to their learning and use of English. This is a unique form of autonomy as "calling" links competence and meaning (Deci & Ryan, 2020; Ryan & Deci, 2020). This spiritual commitment leads to persistence when language is used for social or moral intentions (Hendricks, 2024; Zulkarnain & Widiati, 2023). English became a means for ministry and spiritual connection, as described by Tisdell (2003), in

terms of spiritual connectedness in education. Self-reflections confirmed this change from the need to do and being obliged to do, to what became motivation and willingness to use English, also reflecting Van Manen's (2016) phenomenological concept, that lived experience flows from development and connection, including the ability to make sense of lived experience. Therefore, autonomy and competence are spelled together with one's motivation (Deci et al., 2017) and illustrate how intercultural learning builds personal resilience and cross-cultural empathy (Circovic-Miladinovic, 2021). Finally, the participants advised their fellow learners to be patient and embrace mistakes, manifest a learner-centered, humanistic positioning (Merces & Ryan, 2021), and at the same time support a transformative learning framework, grounded in faith (Nguyen et al., 2022). This collaboration showed how motivation becomes self-propelling in practiced, meaningful spiritual settings.

These study findings are situated in a religious setting. However, the fundamental procedures, like intrinsic motivation, reflection, and meaningful collaboration, can be applied in broader EFL Pedagogical settings. This study encourages EFL non-religious learners to think of their experience learning English not only as a path of emotion, but also as a path of social and spiritual journeys. EFL teachers can adopt this through similar outcomes by creating an environment in which learners use their own experiences to connect their goal to the language they are learning. EFL teachers can help learners to implement reflection on their progress, collaborate and communicate across, promoting learners' autonomy, competency, and confidence. The second premise of this research is that spiritual development, motivation to learn, and intercultural competence can all be developed through intentional learning and self-reflection across numerous EFL learner groups, regardless of their religious affiliation.

## **Conclusion**

This study explores the motivation to speak English by religious women while living abroad, specifically examining the intersection between Sociocultural Theory and Self-Determination Theory (SDT) concerning language motivation. Living in a new environment served as a medium to support autonomy, competence, and relatedness, which were directly related to intrinsic motivation. The Findings indicate that the shift from an external obligation towards an internal sense of self and a greater purpose was facilitated by the community support and peer interaction. This is more than a notion that motivation is both contextual and developed through a sense of identity (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2021). Learning English is more than an academic requirement that reinforces vocation, solidarity, and service.

The result of this study shows that, as far as missionary language learners are concerned, language learning is more than a cognitive task, but rather is a relational and purposeful experience. The motivation of the Canossian Sisters to use a second language is not merely based on an integrative motivation (Gardner et al., 1985), but as a means of creating a spiritual bond between people of different cultures and to respond to their vocational call. The study significantly contributes to the literature by providing insight into the day-to-day experiences of religious women who are part of a faith-based community. This research study made a theoretical contribution to the literature by extending SDT (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2020) to a faith-based context to elaborate how autonomy, competence, and relatedness interplay with faith and community. Theoretically, the study affirms the Sociocultural Theory (SCT) (Gauvain, 2008; Kozulin, 2002) notion that learning and motivation are socially mediated through community life, social interaction, encouragement, and identity. Practically, the results indicate that language programs in missionary or religious settings should utilize context-responsive and humanistic pedagogies that acknowledge learners' emotional and spiritual lives.

Despite its rich and in-depth findings, there are three limitations associated with this study: First, the sample was made up only of four participants from one faith institution. Therefore, future research could include other faith communities and larger groups of people to verify the patterns of missionary motivation across diverse institutions. Second, this study has been conducted in a particular geographical context. Therefore, future studies should examine differences in the provision of missionary services in various countries to see the factors that affect the development of the services. Finally, this data has a cross-sectional design; as a result, future research should use longitudinal and/or mixed method designs to investigate how missionary motivation develops over a long period of time.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

## Declaration of AI use

No Generative AI and AI-Assisted technologies were used by the authors in the writing process.

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