

The situational motivation of Iranian EFL learners amid the COVID-19 pandemic

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Abstract

This study examined the situational motivation of Iranian EFL (English as a Foreign Language) learners amid the COVID-19 pandemic through a descriptive and correlational design. To this end, the 16-item version of the Situational Motivation Scale constructed was employed. The participants were 65 university students who had taken a general English course. The data were fed into SPSS. The findings indicated that intrinsic motivation and amotivation were the lowest and highest categories of the scale. That is, the course had no inherent pleasure for the participants and they experienced feelings of ineffectiveness and beliefs of uncontrollability. Also, it was found that there was a significant, moderate and negative relationship between Intrinsic motivation and external regulation and motivation. Also, the relationship between amotivation and external regulation was significant, strong and positive.

Keywords: COVID-19, EFL, intrinsic motivation, online education, situational motivation;

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1. Introduction

The outbreak of COVID-19 has caused a transformation of learning environments from traditional face-to-face education into obligatory online learning, which has significantly challenged the teaching and learning practices in higher education. In this regard, Islamic Azad University, Iran, was not an exception; authorities have shown their serious concerns for the students and professors during the pandemic situation and put their best efforts to cope with the problems. In fact, they did not leave teachers and students with their feelings of panic and uncertainty. Rather, in a very short notice, they started using an online platform called Vadana for all the branches across the country in this ambiguous context. However, the efficiency and challenges of this form of online education has not been examined so far.

Many aspects of online education can be investigated to shed light on this ambiguous context; however, among various variables, which can potentially influence the quality of learning, motivation of language learners was selected as it seems to be the dominant factor. Motivation, according to Dörnyei (2005, p. 1), is the drive behind human behaviours: 'why people think and behave as they do'. More specifically, the guiding question for the researchers in the current study is the situational motivation of Iranian high school EFL learners in a virtual platform that was new for all stakeholders. It aims to identify and examine learners' motivation in learning English through virtual learning amid the COVID-19 pandemic. The findings of the investigation are expected to shed light into the issue and inform and motivate teachers or practitioners to make the interactive instructional design by taking into account learners' instrumental and integrative motivation. In this pandemic context, learners' motivation can be raised by adopting and implementing appropriate online education.

In addition, as shown in Figure 1 (Meşe & Sevilen, 2021), the number of scientific studies on online learning motivation has increased considerably over recent years. This could be another indication that online learning leads to crucial questions related to learners' motivation and such studies will gain greater popularity in the future.

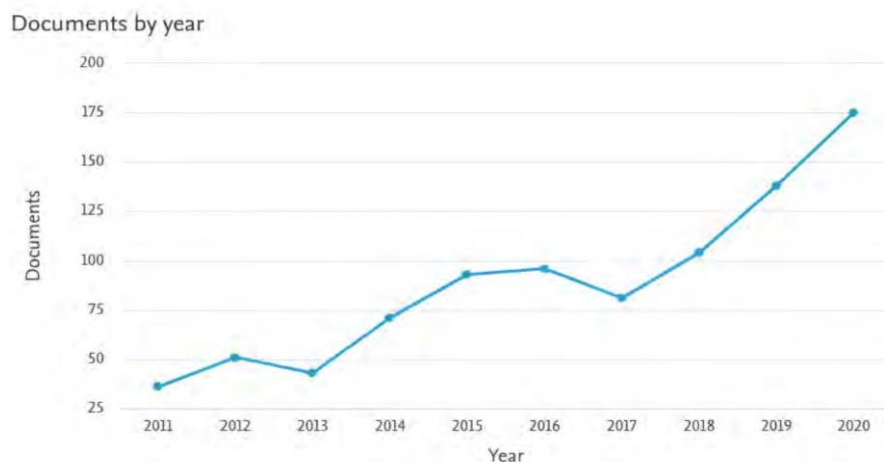


Figure 1. The number of recent studies related to online learning motivation (obtained from the Scopus database)

2. Literature review

Situational motivation, as defined by Guay, Valois, Falardeau, and Lessard (2016), refers to the motivation of individuals' experience when they are currently engaging in an activity. In other words, it is the here-and-now of individuals' motivation. Furthermore, previous research (e.g., Campbell & Sarac 2018; Özhan & Kocadere, 2020) has shown that one's current motivation is related to psychological outcomes such as

positive affect and vitality. Therefore, situational (or state) motivation, as estimated at a specific point in time, provides researchers, materials developers and teachers a useful understanding of a person's current (or state) self-regulatory processes.

According to Deci and Ryan (1985), different types of motivation inspire human behaviour. These types are different in their intrinsic levels of self-determination. Self-determination includes a true sense of choice; a sense of feeling free in doing what an individual has chosen to do. These motivations, which are listed on a range from high to low levels of self-determination, are intrinsic motivation, extrinsic motivation and amotivation.

Technically speaking, as Deci and Ryan (2000) point out, intrinsic motivation refers to activities carried out for their own sake, or for their inherent interest and enjoyment. Intrinsically motivated behaviours characterise activities that are fun, interesting and optimally challenging. When they are not, there will be little or no motivation to engage in them unless incentives are given or external/social stimuli are made significant, i.e., unless extrinsic motivations are there. Games and exploration exemplify intrinsically motivated activities, as they do not depend on external stimuli or pressure, but rather provide their own pleasure, satisfactions or joys. Intrinsic motivation is likely responsible for the majority of human learning across the life span, as opposed to externally motivated learning and instruction (Ryan & Deci, 2017).

On the other hand, often contrasted with intrinsic motivation is the category of extrinsic motivation, which refers to those activities done for reasons other than their inherent satisfactions. The term extrinsic motivation, according to Deci, Olafsen, and Ryan (2017, p. 21) 'involves doing an activity to attain a separable consequence, whether tangible or otherwise'. Extrinsic motivation is associated with the anticipation of extrinsic rewards or avoidance of punishment (Dörnyei, 1998). Therefore, learners are motivated primarily, intrinsically or extrinsically based on how they are affected by internal or external influences.

Besides, concerning the relationship between foreign language achievement and different types of motivation addressed above, a plethora of researches have been conducted on different contexts (e.g., Azizi & Nemati, 2018; Becirovic, 2017; Brown, 2014; Meshkat & Hassani, 2011). Some of these researchers have reported a positive correlation between intrinsic motivation and language achievement and a negative correlation between extrinsic motivation and language accomplishment (e.g., Busse, 2013). Others (e.g., Logan, Medford, & Hughes, 2011) indicated that intrinsic motivation, rather than extrinsic motivation, is correlated with L2 achievement. Moreover, the findings of research in this area have demonstrated that intrinsic motivation is a major factor influencing learners' interactional performances (e.g., Xie & Ke, 2011). Previous research (e.g., Paige, 2011) has indicated that extrinsic motivation can serve to develop intrinsic motivation and consequently better L2 achievement. However, some research (e.g., Geddes, 2016) is indicative of the equal importance of the two motivational constructs, namely intrinsic and extrinsic for L2 attainment.

In addition to intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, Deci and Ryan (1985, cited in Ryan & Deci, 2000) proposed a third motivational concept namely, *amotivation*, to fully understand human behaviour. Ryan and Deci (2000, p. 61) define this concept as 'the state of lacking an intention to act'. When amotivated, individuals are neither intrinsically nor extrinsically motivated, they further state that these individuals believe they lack the ability to perform a task, they often distrust the strategies being followed and they are usually in the state of helplessness. On the whole, intrinsic and extrinsic motivations, as well as amotivation, are considered one of the most powerful dimensions of the motivation construct and it is worth examining this kind of motivation in the COVID-19 pandemic situation. The quality of online education can be improved by designing relevant course content and organisation (Makokha & Mutisya,

2020) and employing appropriate teacher training and affordable technological support (Queiros & de Villiers, 2016). Furthermore, learners' motivation is a vital account of online education since positive learners' motivation can improve the level of enjoyment in language learning (Zhang, Dai, & Wang, 2020).

2.1. Motivation and online learning

Motivation in online courses, as depicted in the Introduction section, has received attention in recent years (Lin, Zhang, & Zheng, 2017; Yantraprakorn, Darasawang, & Wiriyakarun, 2018). These studies have examined the relationship between online learning and learner motivation in second/foreign language education contexts. According to Campbell and Sarac (2018), technology is an integral part of language learning these days and it increasing enhances learners' motivation and maximises their understanding of the content. However, Rubio (2013) argued that a well-designed combined course with online and offline elements can be more efficient than a well-designed face-to-face or a well-designed purely online education in helping learners increase their motivation.

Uzunboylu (2019) Suggested that mixed or separate learning environments related to and supporting EFL for speaking, writing, listening and reading skills should be developed or explored while learning English or other languages for learners in social media.

In accordance with online education to motivate students, Kreal and Klema (2006) compared the particular feature of some open-source online education systems and effective education. It is implied that the biggest obstacle of online learning is adaptability and motivation. Also, the research conducted by Kim and Frick (2011) has shown that online education is a great positive factor to change language learners' motivation. In this regard, Murday, Ushida, and Ann Chenoweth (2008) and Ushida (2005) argue that blended courses are mostly regarded as more efficient than their completely online counterparts because they do not rely too much on learners' motivation. Furthermore, Lin et al. (2017) also examined the roles of learning strategies and motivation on learning in an asynchronous language education context, which is additional to face-to-face courses. They found that the students had low levels of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation in their online education course. They finally discussed that low motivation of learners might have been caused by a lack of real-time interaction with teachers and classmates.

The findings of Basilaia and Kavadze (2020) indicate that the transition of students from the traditional to the online education form is very fast and the experience can be used in the next educational system after the COVID-19 pandemic. Contrarily, Adnan and Anwar (2020) argued that learners in Pakistan could not afford to create a suitable context for online education. Pakistani students had difficulty to access the Internet due to financial problems and they have lost their motivation to learn since face-to-face interaction stopped as a consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Based on these explanations and research addressed above, it can be concluded that the motivation of language learners can be influenced by some factors, such as pure online education and their condition during the COVID-19 pandemic in Iran. In this regard, the current study is an attempt to examine the situational motivation of Iranian EFL learners amid the COVID-19 pandemic.

3. Method

The participants of this study were 65 university students who had taken a general English course at Islamic Azad University of Kazarun, Iran, through availability sampling. The course is obligatory but the participation in this study remained optional by the course professor. Both males (23) and females (42) were recruited (mean age = 20.3 years). Students were studying different disciplines at university and they came from different cities, mostly from Fars Province, Iran.

The main platform for online courses at Islamic Azad University is Vadana; however, as this is an

official medium of education, the professor of the course preferred not to conduct the study there and instead he asked volunteers to participate in the study through Skype. On the whole, there were 120 students in 3 classes; however, 75 students volunteered to take part in the study, out of whom only 65 students completed and returned the questionnaire. The procedure of data collection lasted for 2 weeks in October 2021.

The instrument of data collection was the 16-item version of the Situational Motivation Scale constructed by Guay et al. (2000). The stem of the item reads ‘Why are you currently engaged in this activity?’ and the measure consists of sub-scales intended to gauge intrinsic motivation, integrated regulations, external regulation and amotivation. The questionnaire employs a 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*not all*) to 7 (*exactly*). The scale has shown high levels of both construct and concurrent criterion-related along with internal consistency (Guay et al., 2000). In the present study, the obtained values of Cronbach’s alpha ranged from 0.76 to 0.83.

4. Results

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics of different categories of the Situational Motivation Scale, namely intrinsic motivation, identified regulation, external regulation and amotivation. As the data indicate, the highest mean belongs to the category of amotivation ($M = 6.3$), followed by external regulation ($M = 6.1$). Far from these two categories was identified regulation ($M = 2.8$), closely followed by the lowest category, namely intrinsic motivation ($M = 2.1$).

Table 1. Descriptive statistics (Motivation)

	N	Mean	Std. deviation	Std. error	95% Confidence interval for mean		Minimum	Maximum
					Lower bound	Upper bound		
Intrinsic motivation	60	2.1333	1.52345	0.19668	1.7398	2.5269	1.00	5.00
Identified regulation	60	2.8833	1.49680	0.19324	2.4967	3.2700	1.00	7.00
External regulation	60	6.0667	0.98921	0.12771	5.8111	6.3222	3.00	7.00
Amotivation	60	6.3500	0.97120	0.12538	6.0991	6.6009	2.00	7.00
Total	240	4.3583	2.26228	0.14603	4.0707	4.6460	1.00	7.00

The graphic representation of the mean score of each category is shown in Figure 2.

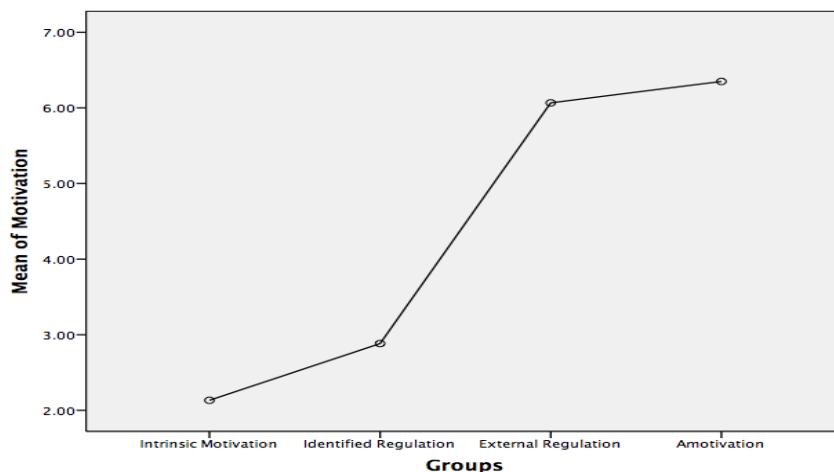


Figure 2. Means' plots

Based on the criteria given by Guay et al. (2000), the mean score of 1 = not all; 2 = a very little; 3 = a little; 4 = moderately; 5 = enough; 6 = a lot; and 7 = exactly. Based on this, it can be concluded that the participants of this study were very little intrinsically motivated. In other words, they were very little motivated to take the General English course itself; the course had no inherent pleasure and satisfaction for them. Also, the mean score of 3 (when rounded up) for identified regulation highlights *that the course* is valued a little and not as something being chosen by themselves voluntarily. That is, it is an obligation and all students are required to take, attend and pass the course.

However, with regard to the other two categories, i.e., external regulation and amotivation (with the mean scores of 6.1 and 6.3, respectively), the case is different. High *external regulation* occurs when behaviour is controlled and regulated by rewards or in order to avoid negative consequences (in our study, failing the course). In other words, regardless of whether the goal of taking the course and attending the class is to pass the course (obtain rewards) or to avoid negative consequences (taking the course and paying the fee again, postponing graduation, remaining behind the schedule and peers etc.), students mostly experience an obligation to behave in a certain way.

Finally, the category of amotivation with the highest mean score ($M = 6.3$) indicates that the participants had no sense of purpose and no expectations of reward or possibility of changing the course of events. The high mean score of amotivation among these students can thus be viewed as a state of helplessness where they experience feelings of ineffectiveness and beliefs of uncontrollability.

In addition, as presented in Table 2, there was a significant, moderate and negative relationship between intrinsic motivation and external regulation ($r = -0.609$) and amotivation (-0.669). Also, the relationship between amotivation and external regulation is significant, strong and positive ($r = 0.714$).

Table 2. Correlations

			Intrinsic motivation	Identified regulation	External regulation	Amotivation
Spearman's rho	Intrinsic motivation	Correlation coefficient	1.000	0.146	-0.609**	-0.669**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.	0.265	0.000	0.000

	<i>N</i>	60	60	60	60
Identified regulation	Correlation coefficient	0.146	1.000	-0.041	-0.201
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.265	.	0.756	0.124
	<i>N</i>	60	60	60	60
External regulation	Correlation coefficient	-0.609**	-0.041	1.000	0.714**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000	0.756	.	0.000
	<i>N</i>	60	60	60	60
Amotivation	Correlation coefficient	-0.669**	-0.201	0.714**	1.000
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000	0.124	0.000	.
	<i>N</i>	60	60	60	60

**Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

5. Discussion and Conclusion

According to the self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2017), intrinsic motivation, identified regulation, external regulation and amotivation are differently related to different types of outcomes. In fact, as these four types differ in their inherent levels of self-determination and that self-determination has been assumed to be related to enhanced psychological functioning (Ryan & Deci, 2017), it can be expected that intrinsic motivation is mostly associated with positive outcomes (e.g., persistence and more participation in activities), followed by identified regulation. On the contrary, the most negative outcomes (e.g., depressive states) will stem from amotivation, followed by external regulation.

The outcome of high intrinsic motivation is noticeable within formal education. For instance, Taylor et al. (2014), based on a meta-analysis with additional studies of high school and university students, indicated that intrinsic motivation was consistently related to higher performance. Similarly, Froiland and Worrell (2016) argued that intrinsic motivation predicted student engagement, which is a strong predictor of higher achievement. Based on this, as the intrinsic and identified regulation of the participants of this study was very little, low engagement, lack of persistence and consequently low achievements can be predicted.

In this regard, the findings of this research are in line with research from other countries, suggesting that intrinsic motivation tends to decline over the school or college years (e.g., Gillet, Vallerand, & Lafreniere, 2012 and Scherrer & Preckel, 2019). This suggests that online educational context of Islamic Azad University amid the COVID-19 pandemic is not creating the atmosphere that nurtures this inner resource. Gnambs and Hanfstingl (2016) also indicted that a decline in intrinsic motivation is highly correlated with declining psychological need fulfilment.

Moreover, as Ryan and Deci (2020) argue, trying to control educational outcomes directly through extrinsic rewards, sanctions and evaluations largely backfires, and consequently will result in low-quality motivation and performance. In line with this argument, the findings of the current study indicate a significant strong positive relationship between external regulation and amotivation. In other words, as students see the courses they take merely as an obligation, which is an external regulation, they cannot consider the activity valuable, which is amotivation. This atmosphere can result from lack of felt competence to perform, or lack of value or interest. Of course, the findings of this study should be

generalised with caution due to its limitations including the number of participants and the instrument of study. Other studies need to be conducted with interviews, open-ended questionnaires and a larger number of participants to come up with a better picture regarding the nature of motivation, the causes and the consequences. However, based on the findings of the current research, amotivation was common in online contexts of Islamic Azad University during the COVID-19 pandemic; as a result, low engagement, learning and wellness are predicted for Iranian EFL learners in this context.

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