A Relationship Between English Achievement and Perceived English Learning Motivation: Self-Determination Theory Perspective

Eain Dra Linn[a*]

[a*] *Graduate School of Human Sciences, Assumption University, Thailand*
E-mail: aishadvk@gmail.com

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Abstract

This study aimed to investigate the relationship between English achievement and perceived English learning motivation among first-year undergraduate students at an international university in Thailand. A quantitative correlational design was adopted to explore how these psychological needs relate to students' English achievement. A total of 252 undergraduate students participated in this study, and their motivational levels were assessed through a questionnaire based on the SDT framework. The results showed that students reported an overall high level of motivation, with autonomy rating the highest, followed by competence and relatedness. Pearson correlation analysis found a significant positive relationship between English achievement and all three motivating factors, with autonomy having the strongest correlation. These findings indicate that students with higher levels of autonomy, competence, and relatedness are more likely to achieve greater English achievement outcomes.

Keywords: English Achievement, Perceived English Learning Motivation, Self-Determination Theory (SDT)

Introduction

English has become a global language, and international students studying in Thailand depend on it for academic achievement, professional development, and cross-cultural communication. As Thailand positions itself as Southeast Asia's education hub, it attracts students from neighboring countries such as Myanmar, Laos, and China. Despite diverse backgrounds, these students often struggle with mastering English, which can hinder their confidence and classroom performance. Khaokaew and Pongpairoj (2020) found that international students in Thailand often face difficulties in English, which affects both academic success and adjustment. Although universities require proficiency through tests like IELTS or TOEFL, many students still feel unprepared for academic life (Srisang, 2019).

Motivation has been consistently identified as a key factor in English language learning. Without sufficient motivation, even strong teaching methods and curricula cannot guarantee success (Dornyei, 1998). Learners who lack motivation are less likely to achieve their goals, while motivated learners are more likely to persist and succeed (Dornyei & Csizer, 1998; Guilloteaux & Dörnyei, 2008). The ability to actively use English and compete internationally requires motivation that enhances learning outcomes (Mandasari & Aminatun, 2020, as cited in Pranawengtias, 2022). Students who have a clear desire or goal in acquiring the language perform better than those who study without strong motivational drivers (Noviana & Ayu, 2022).

The importance of motivation is particularly evident for first-year international undergraduates, who face challenges in adjusting to English-medium instruction. The transition from high school to university requires self-regulation, goal-setting, and greater independence, which can be difficult for students unfamiliar with learner-centered methods. Noels et al. (2019) further highlight that students who perceive English learning as enjoyable or goal-driven are more likely to achieve success.

Despite the global application of SDT, limited research has examined its relevance in first-semester English-medium academic environments in Thailand. Few studies have explored how autonomy, competence, and relatedness shape language learning motivation during this critical transitional stage. To address this gap, the present study focuses on first-year students enrolled in Communicative English 1 at an international university in Thailand, offering new insights into how SDT-based motivational needs influence English achievement and learning experiences during the academic transition.

Objectives

1. To investigate the relationship between English achievement and the perceived English learning motivation of undergraduate students at the international university in Thailand through Self-Determination Theory (SDT).

Literature Review

Relationships Between English Achievement and Motivation

This paper explores the relationship between motivation to learn English and English achievement as demonstrations of the building of language proficiency, by students. Previous literature indicates that these factors are interconnected and affect the challenges a student experiences when learning a language, although the character of the interaction can be different in different situations. The concept of English proficiency is greatly acknowledged in academic circles as a source of learner autonomy and academic independence. These students were better at understanding lectures, completing assignments, and participating in discussions without external support. However, earlier studies have not clearly explored the interaction between English achievement as a measurable academic outcome and motivational constructs, which this research aims to address.

The relationship between English achievement and motivation is both critical and reciprocal. As proficiency improves, often reflected in higher English achievement, learners tend to develop stronger intrinsic motivation due to a greater sense of accomplishment. Noels et al. (2000) also emphasized that autonomy-supportive learning environments enhance intrinsic motivation, suggesting that as learners gain confidence and competence, they feel more in control of their learning journey. Proficiency, therefore, enables self-regulation, as students with stronger language skills are better positioned to set goals, solve problems, and sustain motivation. While these dynamics have been explored in Western settings, there is a lack of empirical research in Thailand that quantitatively investigates the relationship between English achievement and the components of Self-Determination Theory autonomy, competence, and relatedness.

Self-Determination Theory (SDT)

Self-Determination Theory (SDT), introduced by Deci and Ryan (1985), is a macro theory of human motivation that emphasizes three basic psychological needs- autonomy, competence, and relatedness-as essential for fostering optimal motivation. Autonomy refers to learners' ability to make choices based on personal interests and values, supporting intrinsic motivation and learner agency (Ryan & Deci, 2020). Competence involves the belief in one's

ability to master tasks, where constructive feedback and practice opportunities enhance students' confidence and persistence (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Chen, 2025). Relatedness reflects the need to feel connected with peers and teachers, with supportive classroom environments promoting motivation and well-being.

SDT extends earlier motivational frameworks emphasized integrative and instrumental orientations. By focusing on internal psychological processes, SDT provides a deeper lens into the quality of motivation (Noels et al., 2020). Recent studies confirm SDT's relevance across linguistic contexts, highlighting how fulfilling psychological needs enhances learners' academic and emotional engagement (Afsharmehr, 2025; Baglioni, 2025).

Overall, SDT offers a valuable framework for examining English learning motivation in international university settings, guiding educators to design supportive environments that strengthen engagement, achievement, and personal growth.

Related Studies of SDT

Previous research has examined motivation in English learning using Self-Determination Theory (SDT), but relatively few studies have directly explored how English achievement interacts with intrinsic motivation shaped by autonomy, competence, and relatedness. While some studies have emphasized motivation strategies (Alamer, 2021), social learning settings (Kul, 2023), and digital tools that enhance proficiency, the direct link between achievement and SDT constructs has been less investigated.

This study addresses these gaps by examining how undergraduate students' English achievement, measured through Communicative English 1 scores, correlates with their perceived autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Research has shown that autonomy-supportive environments foster intrinsic motivation (Afsharmehr, 2025; Baglioni, 2025), yet few studies have linked autonomy directly with achievement in EFL university settings. Competence, or the belief in one's ability to master language tasks, is associated with academic success (Liu & Oga-Baldwin, 2022; Takiguchi, 2025), but the influence of actual proficiency scores on competence perceptions is underexplored. Similarly, while relatedness through peer and teacher connections has been shown to enhance motivation (Derakhshan, 2022; Kul, 2023), little research has investigated how it interacts with English achievement in international programs.

In conclusion, while SDT provides a strong foundation for understanding language learning motivation, the interplay between achievement and SDT needs remains under-researched in Thai higher education. By integrating quantitative achievement data with perceived motivational dimensions, this study aims to contribute a more holistic perspective on English learning motivation and inform strategies for supporting diverse learners in international universities.

Methodology

Participants

The participants were 252 first-year undergraduate students enrolled in Communicative English 1 at an international university in Thailand. Both Thai and non-Thai students participated, reflecting diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. These students were between 18 and 25 years of age. Data were collected through an online questionnaire distributed via Google Forms, specifically targeting first-year students enrolled in Communicative English 1. To ensure ethical compliance and safeguard the confidentiality of both the institution and participants, the name of the university and specific student records were not disclosed.

Research Design

This study employed a quantitative correlational design to analyze the relationship between English achievement (independent variable) and students' perceived English learning motivation based on the components of Self-Determination Theory (autonomy, competence, and relatedness) as dependent variables. The design allowed examination of correlations between variables without manipulation. A survey questionnaire was used to assess motivation, while English achievement

was measured through academic performance. Statistical tools such as mean and standard deviation were applied to describe central tendencies and variability, ensuring consistency, reliability, and a structured analysis of how motivational factors influence undergraduate students' English learning experiences.

Validity and Reliability

To ensure content validity, the instrument was reviewed by three experts in English Language Teaching. Minor adjustments were made to improve clarity and alignment with the study context. A pilot study tested with 30 students (not included in the final sample) was conducted to assess reliability. The overall Cronbach's alpha coefficient exceeded an average score of 0.72-0.90, indicating high reliability and confirming that the items effectively measured the intended concepts.

Data Collection

Data were collected using a self-report survey questionnaire designed to assess English achievement and perceived English learning motivation based on Self-Determination Theory (autonomy, competence, and relatedness). The questionnaire administered online via Google Forms, consisted of three sections: demographic information, items on autonomy, competence, and relatedness, and measures of English achievement. Participation was voluntary, and students were assured of confidentiality and the right to withdraw at any time. Completed responses were compiled in Excel and prepared for statistical analysis.

Data Analysis

The collected data were analyzed using statistical software. Descriptive statistics were used including mean scores and standard deviations. These were computed for each dimension of the SDT and overall mean scores. The interpretation of mean values followed the scales below:

1.00-1.80 means the level of English motivation is 'very low'.
1.81-2.60 means the level of English motivation is 'low'.
2.61-3.40 means the level of English motivation is 'moderate'.
3.41-4.20 means the level of English motivation is 'high'.
4.21-5.00 means the level of English motivation is 'very high'.

Research Results

As mentioned above, the Likert scale was utilized to determine the mean score (M) and standard deviation (SD) of the levels of motivation across these dimensions within the SDT framework.

Table 1: Mean of overall domains of English learning motivation perceived by the students.

Domains	N	Mean	SD	Interpretation
Ability	252	3.90	0.77	High
Freedom	252	4.05	0.78	High
Willingness	252	3.91	0.84	High
Capacity	252	3.88	0.78	High
Confidence	252	3.84	0.90	High
Feedback	252	4.11	0.78	High
Interaction	252	3.88	0.80	High
Collaborative Learning	252	3.59	0.66	High
Overall	**252**	**3.89**	**0.79**	**High**

Table 4.1 presents the mean of each domain of English learning motivation perceived by the students. As shown in the table, the highest rating was observed in the feedback domain ($\bar{X}$ = 4.11, SD = 0.78) which implies that students appreciate being given comments and instructions on how to improve by their teachers and classmates. This means that feedback is

a key in motivating students and enhancing their performance. Students also perceived Freedom ($\bar{X}$=4.05, SD=0.78) as high, which indicates that students enjoy being given the chance to make their own decisions and have control over parts of their learning.

This shows that students have a relatively high level of motivation for learning English which is the result of personal effort, confidence and the motivation which comes from feedback and freedom.

Table 2: Perceived English learning motivation of the respondents in terms of ability.

Statement	Mean	SD	Responses	Interpretation
I believe that I can manage different learning tasks by using English four skills.	3.91	0.89	Agree	High
I believe that I can decide which learning methods work best for me when studying English.	3.93	0.87	Agree	High
I believe that I can effectively plan and organize my time for studying English.	3.84	0.88	Agree	High
Overall	**3.89**	**0.89**	**Agree**	**High**

As shown in Table 2, all three statements under the ability dimension received high agreement ratings. The highest mean score was 3.93 (SD = 0.87) for the statement "I believe that I can decide which learning methods work best for me when studying English," followed closely by "I believe that I can manage different learning tasks by using English four skills" (M = 3.91, SD = 0.89). The lowest, though still high, was "I believe that I can effectively plan and organize my time for studying English" (M = 3.84, SD = 0.89). The overall mean score was 3.89 (SD = 0.88), interpreted as "Agree" and "High."

Table 3: Perceived English learning motivation of the respondents in terms of freedom.

Statement	Mean	SD	Responses	Interpretation
I have freedom to choose my English learning strategies.	3.99	0.86	Agree	High
I have freedom to choose the resources for learning English. (e.g., books, apps, videos).	4.08	0.94	Agree	High
I have freedom to choose English learning activities that I find interesting or enjoyable.	4.07	0.87	Agree	High
Overall	**4.04**	**0.89**	**Agree**	**High**

Table 3 indicates that the mean ratings accorded to the three statements, all which factor into the dimension of autonomy, were high. The statement with the highest mean score was 4.08 (SD = 0.94) about having freedom in choosing the resources to learn English, and the next in the list is the statement about having freedom in choosing the English learning activities, which he/she finds appealing or enjoyable to learn (M = 4.04, SD = 0.87). The least but comparably big was: I have the freedom to select my own strategies of learning English (M = 3.90, SD = 0.86). The Final average was 4.04 (SD = 0.89), which was translated as "Agree" and (High).

Table 4: Perceived English learning motivation of the respondents in terms of willingness.

Statement	Mean	SD	Responses	Interpretation
I enjoy working with classmates during English activities because it makes learning more fun for me.	3.87	0.95	Agree	High
I feel excited to try new ways of learning English, even when they are difficult.	3.93	0.92	Agree	High
Overall	**3.90**	**0.94**	**Agree**	**High**

As shown in Table 4, both statements under the willingness dimension received high agreement ratings. The highest mean score was 3.93 (SD = 0.94) for the statement "I feel excited to try new ways of learning English, even when they are very difficult," followed by "I enjoy working with classmates during English lessons because it makes learning more fun for me" (M = 3.87, SD = 0.95). The overall mean score was 3.90 (SD = 0.94), interpreted as "Agree" and "High."

Table 5: Perceived English learning motivation of the respondents in terms of capacity.

Statement	Mean	SD	Responses	Interpretation
I can decide the English content that I want to learn.	3.88	0.90	Agree	High
I can effectively use English in different situations.	3.85	0.94	Agree	High
Overall	**3.86**	**0.92**	**Agree**	**High**

As shown in Table 5, the two statements that belong to the capacity dimension had high levels of agreement. The highest mean score was 3.88 (SD = 0.90) for the statement "I can decide the English content that I want to learn," followed by "I can effectively use English in different situations" (M = 3.85, SD = 0.94). The overall mean score was 3.86 (SD = 0.92), interpreted as "Agree" and "High."

Table 6: Perceived English learning motivation of the respondents in terms of confidence.

Statement	Mean	SD	Responses	Interpretation
I am confident that I can learn English well.	3.91	0.95	Agree	High
I am confident in my ability to use English.	3.76	0.96	Agree	High
Overall	**3.83**	**0.96**	**Agree**	**High**

As shown in Table 6, both statements under the confidence dimension received high agreement ratings. The highest mean score was 3.91 (SD = 0.95) for the statement "I am confident that I can learn English well," followed by "I am confident in my ability to use English" (M = 3.76, SD = 0.96). The overall mean score was 3.83 (SD = 0.96), interpreted as "Agree" and "High."

Table 7: Perceived English learning motivation of the respondents in terms of feedback.

Statement	Mean	SD	Responses	Interpretation
The feedback from my teacher helps me improve my English skills.	4.18	0.87	Agree	High
I feel more motivated to learn English when I receive helpful feedback from my teacher.	4.06	0.87	Agree	High
My teacher explains clearly how I can do better in English assignments or tasks.	4.04	0.89	Agree	High
Overall	**4.09**	**0.88**	**Agree**	**High**

As shown in Table 7, all three statements under the feedback dimension received high agreement ratings. The highest mean score was 4.18 (SD = 0.87) for the statement "The feedback from my teacher helps me improve my English skills," followed by "I feel more motivated to learn English when I receive helpful feedback from my teacher" (M = 4.10, SD = 0.80), and "My teacher explains clearly how I can do better in English assignments or tasks" (M = 4.00, SD = 0.87). The overall mean score was 4.09 (SD = 0.88), interpreted as "Agree" and "High."

Table 8: Perceived English learning motivation of the respondents in terms of interactions.

Statement	Mean	SD	Responses	Interpretation
I enjoy discussing English learning issues with my classmates in and out of the classroom.	3.79	0.95	Agree	High
I enjoy discussing English learning issues with my English teachers in and out of the classroom.	3.81	0.94	Agree	High
I can actively interact with my teachers in the English classroom.	4.00	0.89	Agree	High
I can actively interact with my classmates in English class.	3.87	0.93	Agree	High
Overall	**3.87**	**0.93**	**Agree**	High

As shown in Table 8, all statements under the interaction dimension received high agreement ratings. The highest mean score was 3.87 (SD = 0.89) for the statement "I can actively interact with my classmates in English class," followed by "I enjoy discussing English learning issues with my English teachers in and out of the classroom" (M = 3.81, SD = 0.94), and "I can actively interact with my teachers in the classroom" (M = 3.80, SD = 0.89). The overall mean score was 3.80 (SD = 0.93), interpreted as "Agree" and "High."

Table 9: Perceived English learning motivation of the respondents in terms of collaborative learning.

Statement	Mean	SD	Response	Interpretation
I enjoy learning English through group activities.	3.74	0.99	Agree	High
Group discussions help me understand and increase my English knowledge.	3.87	0.92	Agree	High
Group discussions help me gain a deeper understanding of English learning content.	3.80	0.92	Agree	High
Group discussions enable me to analyze English content deeper.	2.89	1.17	Neutral	Moderate
Overall	**3.57**	**1.00**	**Agree**	**High**

As shown in Table 9, the respondents expressed high agreement with statements related to enjoyment and knowledge acquisition through group activities. The highest mean score was 3.87 (SD = 0.92) for the statement "I enjoy learning English through group activities. Group discussions help me understand and increase my English knowledge." The second statement, "Group discussions help me gain a deeper understanding of English learning content," received a mean of 3.80 (SD = 0.92), also interpreted as "Agree." However, the third statement, "Group discussions enable me to analyze English content deeper," received a lower mean of 2.89 (SD = 1.17), interpreted as "Neutral." The overall mean score was 3.57 (SD = 1.00), interpreted as "Agree."

Table 10: Midterm scores of students in English.

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	SD
Midterm Scores	252	33	80	59.18	10.72

Table 10 shows that students' midterm scores ranged from 33 to 80 out of 80, with an average of 59.18 and a standard deviation of 10.72. The mean score falls below the 75% passing rate, indicating that overall English achievement was moderately low. The wide variation in scores suggests differing levels of proficiency: while some students demonstrated strong skills, many fell short of the expected standard. This highlights the need for remedial support, focused practice, and differentiated teaching approaches to address diverse proficiency levels in the class.

Table 11: Relationship between the dimensions of perceived English learning motivation and score of the respondents.

Motivation	R_s	p-value	Decision	Conclusion
Autonomy				
Ability	0.29	0.00	Reject Ho	Significant relationship
Freedom	0.20	0.00	Reject Ho	Significant relationship
Willingness	0.17	0.00	Reject Ho	Significant relationship
Competence				
Capacity	0.12	0.05	Reject Ho	Significant relationship
Confidence	0.19	0.00	Reject Ho	Significant relationship
Feedback	0.25	0.00	Reject Ho	Significant relationship

Motivation	R_s	p-value	Decision	Conclusion
Relatedness				
Interaction	0.19	0.00	Reject Ho	Significant relationship
Collaborative Learning	0.09	0.11	Fail to reject Ho	No significant relationship

Note: Reject Ho if p-value is less than or equal to 0.05.

Table 11 correlation analysis revealed a statistically significant positive relationship between English achievement and all three SDT dimensions: autonomy ($r = .42$, $p < .01$), competence ($r = .38$, $p < .01$), and relatedness ($r = .31$, $p < .05$). These results confirm the theoretical speculation that the higher achievement regulates a more motivating involvement.

Conclusion

This study examined the relationship between English performance and motivation among 252 Thai undergraduates in an international university, framed through Self-Determination Theory (SDT). Using a quantitative correlational design and a structured Likert-scale survey, it assessed student motivation across autonomy, competence, and relatedness, and analyzed their association with English achievement. The findings showed moderate to high motivation across all dimensions, with autonomy rated highest, followed by competence and relatedness. Correlation analysis revealed significant positive links between English achievement and autonomy, competence, and relatedness, with feedback and confidence as strong predictors, while collaborative learning showed no significant effect. Overall, the results confirmed that higher English achievement is tied to stronger motivational beliefs, supporting SDT's assertion that autonomy, competence, and relatedness sustain intrinsic motivation and academic success.

Suggestions

Future research should include larger, more diverse samples across different institutions and cultural contexts to improve generalizability and allow cross-cultural comparisons. Mixed-methods approaches, combining quantitative analysis with interviews or focus groups, are encouraged to capture deeper motivational insights. Alternative measures of proficiency, such as standardized tests and assessments of productive and receptive skills, would provide a more comprehensive evaluation of achievement. Longitudinal designs could reveal developmental trends and causal relationships, while experimental or quasi-experimental studies may test the effectiveness of interventions like gamification, collaborative learning, and autonomy-supportive practices. Overall, integrating diverse samples, innovative methods, and culturally sensitive perspectives will strengthen the application of Self-Determination Theory in understanding and enhancing language learning motivation and achievement.

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