

A STUDY ON THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN STUDENTS' LEARNING MOTIVATION AND LEARNING ENGAGEMENT THE "UNIVERSITY THAI LANGUAGE" COURSE AT GUANGXI UNIVERSITY OF FOREIGN LANGUAGES*

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Abstract

This study examines the levels of learning motivation and learning engagement and their relationships among full-time undergraduates enrolled in the "University Thai Language" course at Guangxi University of Foreign Languages. Grounded in Self-Determination Theory, a mixed-methods design was adopted. The qualitative component was included to clarify how different types of motivation are reflected in students' actual learning engagement. A total of 312 students completed validated scales measuring five dimensions of learning motivation and three dimensions of learning engagement. Descriptive statistics, Pearson correlation, and multiple regression analyses were conducted, supplemented by interviews.

Results indicate moderately high levels of learning motivation ($M = 3.816$) and learning engagement ($M = 3.756$), with emotional engagement highest and

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cognitive engagement comparatively lower. Learning motivation was strongly and positively correlated with learning engagement ($r = 0.775$, $p < .01$) and significantly predicted engagement, explaining 60% of the variance ($R^2 = 0.601$). All five motivational dimensions significantly predicted engagement, with external recognition motivation showing the strongest effect. Learning motivation also significantly predicted behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement. The findings suggest that while students demonstrate positive emotional involvement and active participation, deeper cognitive engagement remains relatively limited and may require stronger intrinsic regulation and instructional support. Interview data further indicate that employment expectations and social recognition are important drivers of engagement in this context.

The findings confirm that learning motivation functions as a central driver of academic engagement in Thai language learning and provide empirical implications for enhancing instructional design and motivational support in less commonly taught language programs. The study also contributes contextual evidence on how regional and career-oriented factors may shape the balance between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation in university language education.

Keywords: learning motivation, learning engagement, self-determination theory, Thai language course, undergraduate students

Introduction

At the national strategic level, the development trajectory of higher education has undergone a significant shift from scale expansion to quality enhancement. In recent years, improving teaching effectiveness and enhancing students' learning outcomes have become central concerns of higher education reform. Within this context, increasing attention has been directed toward understanding the psychological mechanisms underlying students' academic performance, particularly learning motivation and learning engagement.

Against the backdrop of deepening globalisation and the ongoing advancement of the Belt and Road Initiative, cooperation and exchange between China and ASEAN countries have become increasingly close. As the core medium for cross-cultural communication, the instrumental value and cultural bridge role of language have become increasingly prominent. Thailand, as an important member of ASEAN, has witnessed expanding cooperation with China in trade, tourism, culture, and education. Consequently, the demand for interdisciplinary talents with solid Thai language proficiency continues to grow. Higher education institutions serve as the primary venues for cultivating language professionals, and the quality of foreign language education—especially in less commonly taught languages—has attracted growing scholarly attention.

As the core course in Thai language education, the effectiveness of the “University Thai” programme directly influences students’ language competence and professional development. Empirical studies have shown that learning motivation plays a significant role in promoting students’ academic engagement and performance in higher education contexts (Luo et al., 2023). Furthermore, research indicates that both individual psychological factors and contextual support significantly shape the level of students’ learning engagement (Liu, 2023). However, much of the existing literature emphasizes general higher education settings, with limited attention to how motivational structures operate in strategically positioned language programmes such as Thai in Guangxi.

At the regional development level, the Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region leverages its geographical proximity and cultural affinity with ASEAN countries to strengthen cooperation and openness. As a university specialising in applied foreign language education, Guangxi University of Foreign Languages has continuously adjusted the design of its “University Thai Language” course to align with regional socio-economic development needs. However, practical teaching observations reveal that students’ learning motivations are diverse and

sometimes unstable. Some students are primarily driven by external goals such as employment prospects or social recognition, whereas others lack clear future orientation, resulting in fluctuating engagement levels. This situation raises an important question: why do some students show enthusiasm and participation, yet fail to maintain consistent cognitive investment in learning? The possible tension between externally oriented aspirations and the development of intrinsic interest in language mastery requires closer examination.

Recent research further suggests that students' future orientation and professional adaptability significantly influence the strength of the relationship between learning motivation and learning engagement (Zhang et al., 2024). In foreign language learning contexts, particularly, external recognition and employment-oriented motivations have been found to exert a strong predictive effect on students' engagement (Chen & Li, 2025). These findings highlight that motivation structure is closely linked to the depth and sustainability of learning engagement. Nevertheless, it remains unclear how these motivational dimensions interact within the specific institutional and regional context of the "University Thai Language" course.

Therefore, conducting an in-depth exploration of the relationship between university students' learning motivation and learning engagement within the specific context of the "University Thai Language" course holds important practical and theoretical significance. Such research can provide empirical support for optimizing Thai language teaching strategies and enhancing the effectiveness of talent cultivation in less commonly taught language programmes. By examining not only whether motivation predicts engagement but also how different motivational orientations are associated with distinct forms of engagement, this study seeks to provide a more context-sensitive understanding of student learning in regional foreign language education.

Objectives

1. Investigate the current status of students' learning motivation and learning engagement in the 'University Thai' course at Guangxi University of Foreign Languages.

2. Investigate the relationship between students' learning motivation and learning engagement in the 'University Thai Language' course at Guangxi University of Foreign Languages.

3. Investigate the relationship between the various dimensions of students' learning motivation and their learning engagement in the 'University Thai Language' course at Guangxi University of Foreign Languages.

4. Investigate the relationship between students' learning motivation and the various dimensions of their learning engagement in the 'University Thai Language' course at Guangxi University of Foreign Languages.

Hypothesis

H1: Students demonstrate identifiable levels of learning motivation and learning engagement in the University Thai Language course.

H2: Learning motivation is significantly positively related to learning engagement.

H3: The dimensions of learning motivation are significantly positively related to learning engagement.

H4: Learning motivation is significantly positively related to the dimensions of learning engagement (behavioural, emotional, and cognitive engagement).

Literature Review

1. Theoretical Foundation

This study is grounded in Self-Determination Theory (SDT), which conceptualizes learning motivation along a continuum from intrinsic to extrinsic regulation. Intrinsic motivation refers to engaging in learning out of inherent interest or enjoyment, whereas extrinsic motivation involves external rewards or social expectations. Prior research consistently shows that intrinsic motivation is more strongly associated with sustained and deep engagement, while externally regulated motivation may generate participation without long-term cognitive investment (Luo et al., 2023; Wang & Nie, 2025).

Rather than treating intrinsic and extrinsic motivation as opposites, SDT emphasizes the quality of regulation and the degree of autonomy underlying students' behavior. This perspective is particularly relevant in applied language programmes, where career-oriented goals may coexist with personal interest in language learning.

In addition, the ARCS model (Chen Yingying & Li Min, 2025) highlights attention, relevance, confidence, and satisfaction as key motivational conditions. These dimensions complement SDT by explaining how instructional design can either support or hinder the internalization of externally driven goals.

2. Learning Motivation

Learning motivation is generally defined as the psychological force that initiates and sustains learning behavior. University students' motivation typically combines knowledge-oriented interests with career-development considerations (Huang & Shu, 2025). Intrinsic motivation relates to curiosity and self-growth, whereas extrinsic motivation connects to achievement, employment prospects, and social recognition.

Empirical studies show that intrinsic motivation predicts deeper cognitive and emotional engagement, while purely external motives are more likely to support surface participation (Luo et al., 2023; Wang & Nie, 2025). However, in professionally oriented language programmes, extrinsic motives may not necessarily weaken engagement; instead, their impact depends on whether they are internalized and aligned with students' personal goals.

3. Learning Engagement

Learning engagement is widely conceptualized as a multidimensional construct including behavioral, emotional, and cognitive components. Behavioral engagement reflects participation and effort; emotional engagement refers to interest and enthusiasm; cognitive engagement involves strategic thinking and deep processing.

Recent research emphasizes that cognitive engagement requires stronger self-regulation and task complexity, whereas emotional and behavioral engagement can be activated more readily through classroom interaction (Zhao Zicheng, 2025). Different models of engagement vary in emphasis, but the behavioral–emotional–cognitive framework is adopted in this study because it allows for analysis of qualitative differences in students' involvement rather than simply measuring participation frequency.

4. Relationship Between Learning Motivation and Learning Engagement

Extensive empirical evidence supports learning motivation as a core antecedent of engagement. Students with stronger intrinsic regulation tend to invest more cognitive effort and emotional energy (Luo et al., 2023). Research based on the ARCS model further suggests that perceived relevance and confidence significantly enhance engagement (Chen Yingying & Li Min, 2025).

At the same time, contextual factors may shape this relationship. Career orientation and professional adaptability strengthen the transformation of motivation into sustained engagement (Huang & Shu, 2025). Instructional design also plays a moderating role, particularly when autonomy-supportive environments facilitate deeper internalization (Zhao Xiaoyan & Liu Zhenghui, 2025).

Taken together, prior studies suggest that motivation does not influence engagement uniformly; instead, different motivational dimensions may predict distinct forms of engagement.

5. Research Gap

Although previous research confirms the positive association between learning motivation and engagement, most studies focus on mainstream disciplines or globally dominant languages. Research on less commonly taught languages (LCTLs), such as Thai in Chinese universities, remains limited.

More importantly, existing studies rarely examine how regional socio-economic positioning may reshape the balance between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. In strategically located regions such as Guangxi, Thai language learning is closely linked to trade cooperation and employment pathways. Such contextual factors may strengthen external recognition motives while influencing the depth of cognitive engagement.

Therefore, examining the “University Thai” course at Guangxi University of Foreign Languages not only fills a contextual gap but also contributes to understanding how motivational regulation operates within regionally driven language programmes.

Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a quantitative research design supplemented by qualitative interviews. A cross-sectional survey method was adopted to examine the relationship between learning motivation and learning engagement among undergraduate students enrolled in the “University Thai Language” course. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to triangulate the quantitative findings.

An explanatory sequential mixed-methods approach was applied, using interview data to interpret statistical results.

Population and Sample

The research population consisted of full-time undergraduate students enrolled in the “University Thai Language” course at Guangxi University of Foreign Languages. A total of 312 students participated in the study. Since all eligible students enrolled in the course were included, the sample was identical to the population.

To provide complementary qualitative insights, three students representing high, medium, and low academic performance levels were purposively selected for interviews.

Sampling Procedure

A census sampling approach was employed, including all full-time undergraduate students systematically studying the “University Thai Language” course. Part-time students, postgraduate students, and learners participating only in short-term or elective Thai courses were excluded. This ensured that participants had sustained learning experience within the structured Thai language curriculum, thereby enhancing the specificity and validity of the data.

Instrument Development and Validation

Questionnaire Development

Two instruments were used: the Learning Motivation Scale and the Learning Engagement Scale.

The Learning Motivation Scale, adapted from validated instruments, consisted of 18 items across five dimensions. A 6-point Likert scale was employed.

Sample items included improving employment opportunities (external recognition) and broadening knowledge (knowledge-seeking motivation).

The Learning Engagement Scale consisted of 15 items across behavioral, emotional, and cognitive dimensions, measured on a 5-point Likert scale.

Example items addressed active classroom participation (behavioral) and connecting new knowledge with prior learning (cognitive).

Reliability and Validity

Internal consistency was examined using Cronbach's alpha. All subscales showed strong reliability ($\alpha \geq 0.80$). The overall coefficients were 0.913 for Learning Motivation and 0.953 for Learning Engagement.

The high alpha value for engagement indicates strong consistency but was interpreted cautiously due to possible item overlap.

Content validity was assessed using IOC with three experts, and all items achieved acceptable values (≥ 0.67). Construct validity was supported through item-total correlations and theoretical alignment.

Interview Instrument

Semi-structured interviews focused on motivation, participation, curriculum relevance, and learning environment. Themes were coded and compared with quantitative results to identify convergence or explanation.

Data Collection

Questionnaires were distributed online with informed consent and confidentiality assurance. Responses with patterned answering or missing data exceeding 15% were removed. Interviews were conducted online and face-to-face, and transcripts were verified by participants. All procedures complied with research ethics standards.

Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics were used to examine levels of learning motivation and engagement. Reliability and validity were tested using Cronbach's alpha and item correlations. Pearson correlation and multiple regression analyses were conducted to examine relationships and predictive effects. Qualitative findings were integrated at the interpretation stage to explain statistical patterns.

Results

1. Descriptive Statistical Analysis

1.1 Basic Information of the Sample

Before examining the core research variables, descriptive statistics were conducted to present the demographic characteristics of the respondents. This analysis ensures the representativeness and structural stability of the sample for subsequent hypothesis testing.

Table 1 Basic Information Data Statistics

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	147	47.12
	Female	165	52.88
Subject	Humanities	287	91.99
	Other Subjects	25	8.01
Year Group	First Year	152	48.72
	Second Year	160	51.28

The sample demonstrates balanced gender distribution and relatively equal representation between first- and second-year students. Most respondents were from humanities backgrounds, indicating disciplinary concentration within the Thai language programme.

1.2 Descriptive Analysis of Research Variables

To address Research Objective 1 (to investigate the current status of learning motivation and learning engagement), descriptive statistics were calculated for all variables.

Table 2 Descriptive Statistics of Learning Motivation and Learning Engagement

Variable	N	Min	Max	Mean	SD
Exam Score Motivation	312	1.000	5.000	3.922	0.913
Material Pursuit Motivation	312	1.000	5.000	3.772	0.913
External Recognition Motivation	312	1.250	5.000	3.723	0.879
Personal Achievement Motivation	312	1.000	5.000	3.853	0.903
Knowledge & Advancement Motivation	312	1.250	5.000	3.848	0.778
Learning Motivation (Total)	312	1.111	4.944	3.816	0.637

Behavioral Engagement	312	1.200	5.000	3.785	0.895
Emotional Engagement	312	1.250	5.000	3.844	0.896
Cognitive Engagement	312	1.333	4.833	3.674	0.834
Learning Engagement (Total)	312	1.267	4.933	3.756	0.766

The results indicate moderately high levels of both learning motivation ($M=3.816$) and learning engagement ($M=3.756$). Emotional engagement scored highest among engagement dimensions, whereas cognitive engagement was comparatively lower.

2. Analysis of Research Objective 2

Relationship Between Learning Motivation and Learning Engagement

To address Research Objective 2 (to examine the relationship between overall learning motivation and learning engagement), Pearson correlation analysis was conducted.

Table 3 Correlation Between Learning Motivation and Learning Engagement

Variable	Learning Engagement
Learning Motivation	0.775**

** $p < 0.01$

A strong positive correlation ($r=0.775$, $p<0.01$) was observed, indicating that higher learning motivation is associated with higher overall engagement.

3. Analysis of Research Objective 3

Influence of Learning Motivation on Learning Engagement

To further examine whether learning motivation predicts learning engagement, regression analysis was conducted.

Table 4 Regression Analysis of Learning Motivation on Learning Engagement

Variable	B	SE	Beta	p
Constant	0.201	0.167	—	0.228
Learning Motivation	0.931	0.043	0.775	0.000

$R^2 = 0.601$

Adjusted $R^2 = 0.599$

$F(1,310) = 466.502, p < 0.001$

Learning motivation significantly predicts learning engagement and explains approximately 60% of the

4. Analysis of Research Objective 4

Influence of Motivation Dimensions on Learning Engagement

To determine the relative effects of each motivation dimension, multiple regression analysis was performed.

Table 5 Regression Analysis of Motivation Dimensions on Learning Engagement

Variable	B	SE	Beta	p
Exam Score Motivation	0.124	0.037	0.148	0.000
Material Pursuit Motivation	0.205	0.036	0.245	0.000
External Recognition Motivation	0.229	0.041	0.262	0.000
Personal Achievement Motivation	0.175	0.036	0.206	0.000
Knowledge & Advancement Motivation	0.195	0.041	0.199	0.000

$$R^2 = 0.602$$

$$\text{Adjusted } R^2 = 0.596$$

$$F(5,306) = 92.650, p < 0.001$$

All five dimensions significantly predict learning engagement, with external recognition motivation demonstrating the strongest predictive effect.

5. Qualitative Findings

To complement the quantitative findings and provide deeper insight into students' motivational patterns and engagement behaviors, semi-structured interviews were conducted.

The interview results consistently indicate that students with stronger intrinsic motivation (interest, achievement, long-term goals) demonstrate higher behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement. Conversely, students driven primarily by avoidance or minimal exam-oriented motives exhibit low engagement across dimensions.

These qualitative findings further reinforce the statistical results, confirming the significant and positive relationship between learning motivation and learning engagement.

Discussion

1) Current Status of Learning Motivation and Learning Engagement

The findings indicate that students enrolled in the “University Thai” course demonstrate moderately high levels of both learning motivation and learning engagement. Among motivational dimensions, achievement-related and self-development motivations are particularly salient, suggesting that academic performance and personal growth constitute central driving forces in this context.

Regarding engagement, emotional engagement ranks highest, followed by behavioral engagement, while cognitive engagement remains comparatively lower. This pattern suggests that students are generally willing to participate and maintain positive learning-related emotions; however, deeper cognitive investment—such as critical thinking and strategic processing—requires further reinforcement. This divergence reveals a structural imbalance in engagement, in which affective involvement is more readily activated than higher-order cognitive effort. This result aligns with recent research indicating that in foreign language learning contexts, emotional and behavioral engagement are more readily activated, whereas cognitive engagement demands stronger intrinsic motivation and structured instructional support (Luo et al., 2023; Xu & Zhang, 2025).

2) Overall Relationship between Learning Motivation and Learning Engagement

The study confirms a strong and significant positive relationship between overall learning motivation and learning engagement. Learning motivation not only correlates positively with engagement but also demonstrates substantial predictive power, indicating that motivation functions as a foundational determinant of students' active involvement in learning activities.

This finding supports the theoretical assumption derived from motivational frameworks that engagement represents a behavioral and psychological manifestation of underlying motivational processes. Recent empirical studies in higher education similarly emphasize that motivation serves as a core antecedent of sustained engagement and academic persistence (Luo et al., 2023; Chen & Li, 2025). In this respect, the present findings underscore that motivation does not merely accompany engagement but actively shapes its intensity and sustainability, reinforcing the view that strengthening students' motivational structures is essential for enhancing engagement quality.

3) Relationship between Dimensions of Learning Motivation and Overall Learning Engagement

All five dimensions of learning motivation significantly predict overall learning engagement, indicating that both intrinsic and extrinsic motivations contribute meaningfully to students' involvement in the "University Thai" course. Notably, external recognition motivation emerges as the strongest predictor, followed by material pursuit motivation. This suggests that social affirmation and career-related expectations exert particularly strong influence in the context of university-level foreign language learning.

This pattern indicates that Thai language learning is perceived not only as an academic activity but also as a form of social and professional capital. At the same time, intrinsic motivations—such as personal achievement and the pursuit of knowledge—remain critical for maintaining sustained and meaningful engagement. These findings are consistent with recent research suggesting that intrinsic and extrinsic motivations operate in a complementary manner, jointly shaping students' engagement behaviors in higher education settings (Hou & Guan, 2022; Chen & Li, 2025). The results further highlight the contextual nature of motivation, indicating that socially and professionally oriented incentives may be especially salient in applied language programs.

4) Relationship between Learning Motivation and the Dimensions of Learning Engagement

Learning motivation demonstrates significant positive effects across behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement. The predictive effect is strongest for behavioral engagement, followed by emotional engagement, and comparatively weaker for cognitive engagement. This pattern reveals a meaningful paradox: while motivation effectively promotes participation and positive emotional involvement, its influence on deep cognitive processing remains relatively limited.

Consistent with recent scholarship, cognitive engagement is often influenced not only by motivational intensity but also by instructional design, task complexity, and strategic learning support (Xu, X., & Zhang, Q., 2025). Interview evidence further suggests that students driven primarily by external goals tend to focus on task completion rather than analytical exploration, which may partially explain the comparatively lower level of cognitive engagement observed. Therefore, although motivation constitutes a necessary condition for multidimensional engagement, fostering sustained cognitive engagement requires alignment between motivational drivers and structured learning environments.

Recommendations

This study confirms that students in the “University Thai” course demonstrate moderately high levels of learning motivation and learning engagement. Learning motivation significantly and positively predicts overall engagement, including behavioral, emotional, and cognitive dimensions. External recognition and career-oriented motivations show relatively stronger effects, while intrinsic motivations remain essential for sustaining meaningful engagement. Overall, motivation serves as a key driving force behind students’ engagement in Thai language learning.

Recommendations

1) Pedagogical Implications

1. Integrate intrinsic and extrinsic motivational strategies by linking Thai language learning to career pathways and authentic social contexts.
2. Design cognitively demanding tasks (e.g., problem-solving, analysis, reflective learning) to strengthen cognitive engagement.

3. Provide structured instructional scaffolding to support deeper processing beyond participation and positive affect.

2) Directions for Future Research

1. Expand the study to diverse institutional contexts to enhance generalizability.

2. Employ longitudinal or experimental designs to examine causal mechanisms in the motivation–engagement relationship.

3. Further investigate how different types of motivation influence cognitive engagement in foreign language learning contexts.

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