

Motivating Elementary School Students to Learn World Languages: A Mixed-Methods Investigation

Joyce Liu, *Scarsdale High School (NY)*
Weihua Niu, *Pace University (NY)*

Abstract

Early world language learning increases the likelihood of later proficiency and supports cognitive skills such as memory and problem-solving. Motivation is a critical factor in shaping outcomes, and classroom activities play a central role in fostering it. Guided by Self-Determination Theory, this exploratory sequential mixed-methods study investigated classroom activities in Foreign Language in the Elementary School (FLES) contexts. Study 1 used teacher interviews and classroom observations to identify five activity types, which informed a survey in Study 2. Sixty-one fifth-grade students reported on their engagement, motivation, and home language background. Analyses included mixed-design ANOVAs, correlations, and thematic coding. Results showed that multilingual students had higher intrinsic motivation, cultural and creative activities engaged intrinsically motivated learners, and games enhanced extrinsic motivation. Interactive, movement-based tasks also reduced anxiety and promoted participation. Findings highlight the importance of diverse activities to sustain motivation in elementary language learning.

Keywords: *language learner motivation, self-determination theory, classroom activities, FLES, home language environment*

Introduction

A central challenge in elementary world language education is how to effectively motivate young learners to engage in sustained language learning. Although early exposure to a second language is widely believed to support long-term proficiency—consistent with claims such as the *Critical Period Hypothesis* (Rubio, 2022)—early instruction alone does not guarantee meaningful learning outcomes. In practice, many elementary language programs struggle to maintain students' interest, engagement, and willingness to persist beyond initial exposure. Motivation is therefore a critical factor in second language acquisition. Students who are

Creative Commons License



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons CC BY Attribution Non Commercial No Derivatives 4.0 International License

NECTFL Review, Number 96, March 2026, pp. 59-77. © 2026 by NECTFL.
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.17613/s71yc-4bn32>

NECTFL Review Number 96

more motivated are more likely to participate actively, invest effort, and continue learning beyond the classroom (Hiver et al., 2024). However, while motivation has been extensively studied, less is known about which specific classroom activities and instructional strategies most effectively foster motivation among elementary learners. In particular, there remains a need to connect broad motivational theories to concrete, classroom-based practices that teachers can implement.

The present study addresses this gap by investigating the following research question: What types of activities and instructional strategies most effectively motivate elementary school students to learn a foreign language? Guided by Self-Determination Theory, this study examines how different classroom practices support students' motivation through autonomy, competence, and relatedness. To answer this question, the study employs an exploratory sequential mixed-methods design. Qualitative data from teacher interviews and classroom observations were first used to identify key activity types and motivational strategies. These findings then informed the development of a quantitative survey examining the relationship between specific classroom activities and student motivation (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). The paper proceeds with a review of relevant literature, followed by the presentation of two studies, each with its own methods, results, and discussion, and concludes with implications for theory and classroom practice.

Literature Review

Previous studies have shown that motivation plays a central role in second language learning, particularly among young learners. Motivational frameworks relevant to second language acquisition are therefore examined, with attention to their implications for elementary students. Empirical research on classroom activities associated with student motivation and engagement is then synthesized. The section concludes with an overview of Foreign Language in Elementary School (FLES) programs, which provide the instructional context for the present study.

Self-Determination Theory

Not only do students experience different levels of motivation, but they also experience different types of motivation. To understand language learners' motivational orientations, the main motivational framework that this study employed was the Self-Determination Theory (SDT). SDT suggests that the extent to which students are self-determined in their motivation is determined by the fulfillment of three basic psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. *Autonomy* refers to experiencing one's actions as self-endorsed and aligned with personal values, rather than externally pressured. *Competence* involves feeling effective and capable of meeting challenges in a given context. *Relatedness* refers to an experience of meaningful connection and belonging with others.

SDT posits that greater satisfaction of these needs fosters more self-determined forms of motivation, whereby individuals engage in activities out of intrinsic interest or personal value. Therefore, the theory introduces a scale of motivation from *extrinsic motivation*, the performance of an activity to obtain a separable outcome, to *intrinsic motivation*, characterized by an innate curiosity and interest in a subject. Within extrinsic motivation, different types are more self-determined. *External regulation*, the least autonomous form, refers to a person performing a task to satisfy an external demand or receive a reward. *Introjected regulation*, slightly more self-determined, refers to a person performing an activity due to pressure that they have put on themselves, such as avoiding shame or guilt. Next, *identified regulation* refers to when a person performs an activity because

MOTIVATING ELEMENTARY STUDENTS TO LEARN LANGUAGES

they have identified its importance, even if they don't find it interesting. The most self-determined form of motivation is *intrinsic motivation* (Ryan & Deci, 2000b).

Overall, students are more engaged and proactive in their learning when they are more self-motivated. In fact, earlier studies have found that environments that satisfy these SDT needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness foster greater intrinsic motivation than those that do not (Ryan & Deci, 2000a). This framework is highly applicable to young learners as foundational SDT studies specifically investigated the achievement behaviors and regulatory styles of young learners, and have confirmed that even at a young age, students' motivation exists on a spectrum (Ryan & Deci, 2000b). In the language classroom setting specifically, supporting student autonomy has been correlated with more intrinsically motivated students (Dincer & Yesilyurt, 2017).

The Affective-Filter Hypothesis

Another theory of engagement is the Affective-Filter hypothesis, a theory specific to second-language acquisition. Developed by Krashen (1982), this theory posits that students have an affective filter that affects the amount of language input they receive. A higher affective filter leads to lower language input, and a lower affective filter leads to higher language input and more engagement.

Du (2009) describes four factors that regulate the filter: *motivation, attitude, anxiety, and self-confidence*. Motivation, defined as the extent to which a student desires to learn, is one of the most important factors in lowering the filter. Positive attitudes toward language learning foster greater participation, commitment, and progress, thereby lowering the affective filter. Similarly, higher self-confidence makes students more comfortable using the language, which also reduces the filter and enhances classroom learning. Anxiety, by contrast, raises the affective filter, as feelings of apprehension inhibit students' willingness to use the language.

Though this theory was not used to frame research questions or hypotheses, it helps explain the effectiveness of certain activities, and is an important factor to consider when designing activities in order to build student engagement and participation.

Classroom Activities and Motivation

The structure and activities of a language class can influence students' motivation. For example, learning about the culture of a language's speakers can increase students' motivation by increasing feelings of connection to such communities, supporting relatedness needs (Dörnyei, 1994). Moreover, realizing the applicability of language helps students recognize that the language is worth learning (Brophy, 2008). Activities that expose students to the culture and history of the target language are classified as *cultural exposure* activities. Additionally, *creative* or personalized activities, where learners express their own lives and interests in the target language, have been shown to increase motivation by supporting autonomy (Bernard, 2010). Likewise, *interactive* language-use activities, which include collaborative group work and class discussions, and support relatedness needs, have been linked to higher engagement and interest, thereby fostering motivation (Dörnyei, 1994; Sevy, 2016). *Movement*-based activities, or activities that involve movement, also make students feel more engaged and comfortable participating (Valero et al., 2022). Finally, fun, non-drill activities such as music or games sustain learners' interest and have also been shown to increase intrinsic motivation by making language learning more enjoyable (Dörnyei, 1994; Bernard, 2010; Sevy-Billoon, 2017).

The Importance of Multilanguage Background in Second Language Study Motivation

Previous studies have shown that learners' prior linguistic experiences can play an important role in shaping their motivation to learn an additional language. Students with a multilingual background often demonstrate more positive attitudes toward language learning, greater confidence in their ability to acquire new languages, and higher levels of engagement in classroom activities. For example, Dörnyei (2005) suggests that prior success in language learning can strengthen learners' motivational self-concept, increasing their willingness to invest effort in subsequent language study. Bialystok (2001) argues that experience with multiple languages enhances learners' ability to reflect on language as a system, making new language learning tasks more accessible and less intimidating. This increased sense of competence aligns with key principles of Self-Determination Theory, which emphasizes the importance of perceived competence in sustaining intrinsic motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

Individual Differences and Motivation

Although classroom activities play a central role in shaping student motivation, other demographic factors also influence both motivation and language acquisition. For example, personality differences can affect how students are motivated, and intelligence may influence how effectively students acquire a language even when they are motivated (Ryan, 2020). In addition, multilingual students, or those with prior language exposure, are often more open to learning new languages, which can enhance their motivation (Kroll & Dussias, 2017). These factors are important to consider because they may modify the impact of classroom activities on learners. In this study, the primary factor examined beyond classroom activities was students' previous language exposure.

FLES Programs

Foreign Language in the Elementary School, or FLES, is one type of elementary language program implemented in elementary schools across America, and is the elementary program examined in this study. FLES programs focus on developing students' listening and speaking skills, with less focus on grammar. Because FLES classes are for elementary students, they generally use visuals, physical activity, and games to engage students (Reeves, 1989). This study focuses on FLES classrooms because of its widespread use in early language education and because its activity-centered curriculum has been found to foster student engagement.

Specifically, past research indicates that FLES students report higher language proficiency than non-FLES students, and that the authentic language environment that FLES creates can positively influence students' motivation to study a foreign language (Brega & Newell, 1967; Bowen, 1958; Kennedy et al., 2000). This study takes a modern look into FLES classrooms, investigating engagement strategies and classroom activities effective for motivating elementary language learners.

Current Investigation

Although some studies focus on the impact of classroom activities on student motivation, most either focus on older learners (Bernard, 2010) or on subjects not specific to language learning (Ainley, 2012; Meece et al., 1988; Sandström & Granlund, 2006). Although handbooks on language teaching strategies are available, many are theory-based rather than empirically grounded, and much of the literature originates from the 1990s and early 2000s (Dörnyei, 1994; Blaz, 2022).

MOTIVATING ELEMENTARY STUDENTS TO LEARN LANGUAGES

Thus, this study provides an updated, empirical perspective on engagement in elementary language classrooms, examining which strategies and activities are most effective to improve the intrinsic motivation to learn second languages among elementary school students.

This study employed an exploratory sequential mixed-methods design, in which qualitative and quantitative studies were conducted and analyzed separately. Qualitative data were first collected to inform the design of the subsequent quantitative study. Upon completion of both phases, results were triangulated in the general discussion to highlight key findings and pedagogical implications. This design allows a comprehensive exploration of the research topics by leveraging the complementary strengths of qualitative and quantitative methods (Sharma et al., 2023)

Study 1 informed the survey design by identifying classroom activities and engagement strategies used in FLES instruction, drawing on interviews and classroom observations, which provide in-depth qualitative insights (Jordan et al., 2021; Merriam, 1998). Study 2 built on this foundation by examining the relationship between activities and student motivation through surveys. The study's protocol was reviewed by the district's ethics committee, and both the interview and survey were approved after revisions.

Study 1

In Study 1, researchers interviewed FLES teachers and observed their classes to identify commonly used classroom activities and to explore which types of activities appeared to support student engagement and motivation. These qualitative findings were used to inform the development of activity categories and hypotheses for the Study 2 survey.

Study 1: Methods

Below are the methods used for Study 1. Methods for Study 2 will be under Study 2.

Participants

Five elementary FLES teachers from five different schools in New York's Metro-Suburb Area were interviewed, which included one male and four females. Each FLES teacher taught Spanish to grades 2-5 in their respective schools.

Interviews

Interviews were conducted over Zoom, and each lasted about 30 minutes. Interviews followed a semi-structured format, and questions were organized around the following three themes: FLES class structure, classroom activities, and student engagement. Upon receiving oral consent, Zoom meetings were recorded.

Each interview was transcribed and reviewed for accuracy. Interview data were analyzed concurrently with the collection. The researchers conducted extensive coding of the interviews using the thematic analysis method, following the six-phase approach outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), including familiarization with the data, iterative coding, and refinement of themes. Data were then organized according to the activity categories that emerged from the analysis (e.g., creative, interactive, tactile, and movement-based activities).

Observations

Observations were also conducted from April to May during the spring semester of 2025. Two fifth-grade classrooms from this area were selected based on the availability of both the researcher and the teachers. Each observation lasted one 40-minute class period, and field notes were taken throughout. Notes were

NECTFL Review Number 96

transcribed in the order in which interviews and observations were conducted and cross-checked multiple times for accuracy. Taken together, observation and interview findings provide an important overview to complement interview data about activities and engagement in the FLES classroom.

Results and Discussion

Several notable themes emerged regarding classroom activities that teachers perceived as supporting student engagement and motivation.

Fun and Games

Because language learning can be stressful, all teachers emphasized that fun and games help students feel more comfortable and enjoy the process, particularly at the elementary level. Gamifying activities kept classes exciting and engaging, most often through *tactile* and *movement*-based tasks. Tactile activities, such as board or card games, engaged students' sense of touch, while movement-based activities, such as dancing or charades, encouraged physical activity, helping students feel less self-conscious and more willing to participate. As one teacher explained, "They're laughing, they're silly...It lowers anxiety." The first observation corroborated these reports, showing that students were especially energetic and engaged during game-based activities such as Yo También, a game where students respond to prompts by changing seats and trying not to be the last one standing.

Creative Activities

Three teachers observed that students are often most engaged when they have activities where they can be creative, letting them "produce what they want to produce." Moreover, one teacher specifically noted that students feel a greater sense of ownership in activities where they have freedom to use the language as they want. The first classroom observation supported these insights, as students appeared especially engaged and took pride in the original products they created when using Spanish creatively. Examples of creative activities include projects, skits, and writing stories.

Interactive Activities

One teacher noted that students are more comfortable participating in *interactive activities*, where they work with other students in partnerships, small groups, or as a class, explaining that compared to the anxiety of practicing a new language in front of a large group, practicing the language with one or a few peers is considerably less daunting. Another teacher noted that they are especially effective because communication is the essence of language learning. Additionally, all teachers described different interactive activities, such as group projects, partner work, and team games, as being popular among students. Both classroom observations supported this idea, with students actively participating in partner work and eagerly reading words off the board together.

Implications for Study 2

Findings from Study 1 directly informed the design of Study 2 by determining the activity categories students were asked about in the survey. Specifically, the categories of *creative*, *interactive*, *tactile*, and *movement* activities were all asked about in the survey. An additional category of *cultural exposure* activities was included to test their hypothesized role in supporting students' autonomous motivation, as proposed in traditional SDT literature (Brophy, 2008; Dörnyei, 1994).

Study 2

Study 2 takes a mixed-methods approach using quantitative and qualitative measures to investigate the relationship between classroom activities and student motivation. The classroom activities used in this study were generated from findings in Study 1 and the literature review, including tactile, movement-based, cultural, creative, and interactive activities. Using the framework of Self-Determination Theory, students' motivational orientation was measured, including intrinsic motivation, identified motivation, introjected motivation, and extrinsic motivation.

Two hypotheses were proposed. The first hypothesis relates to individual differences impacting student motivation. Specifically, *students from multilingual backgrounds have higher levels of intrinsic motivation* (Kroll & Dussias, 2017). This hypothesis was evaluated using a mixed-design ANOVA comparing motivational orientations across groups. The second hypothesis relates the motivation orientation and activity type. More specifically, *autonomy, competence, and relatedness supporting activities (i.e., cultural, creative, and interactive) positively associate with intrinsic motivation, whereas other types of activities (i.e. tactile and movement) positively associate with extrinsic motivation* (Bernard, 2010; Dörnyei, 1994; Ryan & Deci, 2000b). Although cultural, creative, and interactive activities do not directly target competence needs, these needs may still be fulfilled when students perceive success in understanding cultural content or in producing creative work. This hypothesis was investigated through mixed-design ANOVA and Pearson correlations between activity ratings and motivation orientations. Qualitative data were analyzed to provide additional interpretive context.

Study 2: Methods

This survey was conducted in accordance with the institutional ethical standards of the participating school district and received institutional approval.

Participants

A total of 61 fifth-grade students from the same school district as the teachers were surveyed (29 boys, 32 girls). Among them, 33 students spoke a language other than English at home (multilingual group), 26 spoke only English at home (monolingual group), and 2 students did not report whether they spoke a language other than English at home. Parents provided written consent over an online form, and students whose parents provided consent were invited to participate. Students gave assent before completing the survey in class or at home. Participation was voluntary, and students could withdraw at any time; no students chose to do so.

Measurements

Besides a demographic sheet, regarding gender, ethnicity, and home language, the study includes two questionnaires: a *Motivation Questionnaire* (Carreira, 2012) and an *Activities Questionnaire* (Ryan, 1982).

The *Motivation Questionnaire* (Carreira, 2012) is based on principles of Self-Determination Theory, based on previous research and instrument validations conducted in the SDT paradigm (Ando et al., 2008; Carreira, 2012; Oga-Baldwin et al., 2017). In the current study, the survey was used to measure FLES students' motivational orientations toward learning Spanish. All items from the original survey were retained but adapted to use neutral, age-appropriate wording for 5th-grade students.

The survey included four subscales—intrinsic, identified, introjected, and external regulation—each with four items. An example for a question on the intrinsic motivation subscale is “I learn Spanish because it is fun to”; an example for

the identified regulation subscale is “I learn Spanish because it will be useful for me in the future”; an example for the introjected regulation subscale is “I learn Spanish because I want my teacher to see me as a good student”; and an example for the external regulation subscale is “I learn Spanish because I am told to.” Students responded on a 3-point Likert scale (“Disagree” = 1, “Neither disagree nor agree” = 2, “Agree” = 3), as requested by teachers for accessibility. The questionnaire included 16 items (four per subscale), presented in random order to reduce response bias.

The *Activities Questionnaire* (Ryan, 1982) measures student engagement with different types of activities using closed-ended and open-ended questions. The open-ended section utilized the Interest/Enjoyment scale from the Intrinsic Motivation Inventory, which measures participants’ subjective experience with a target activity (Ryan, 1982; McAuley et al., 1987). The Interest/Enjoyment scale originally included 7 items, out of which we used 2 to increase accessibility for elementary participants. There were 10 items in total. Activity categories were chosen based on recurring themes in Study 1 interviews and observations. Similar activities that were repeatedly described and seen as engaging were grouped into broader categories based on shared characteristics (e.g., *creative activities* such as projects or stories; *interactive activities* such as partner or group work; *tactile activities* such as card or board games; *movement-based activities* such as charades or dancing). *Cultural exposure activities* (e.g., learning about traditions or daily life in Spanish-speaking communities) were additionally included as a survey category based on their hypothesized role in engaging students in motivation literature (Brophy, 2008; Dörnyei, 1994).

The qualitative section of the *Activities Questionnaire* asked students two questions: “*What are three of your favorite things to do in Spanish class (apart from online games like Bloocket or Gimkit)?*” and “*Explain why you like them in 1-2 sentences.*” The exception to the first question was suggested by students’ teachers, who noted that otherwise, students would overwhelmingly list digital games, limiting insight into other classroom activities. The purpose of these qualitative questions was to add nuance to quantitative survey responses and clarify the activities and underlying factors behind student motivation.

Quantitative Survey Results and Discussion

In this study, there are two major hypotheses. The first hypothesis states that students from multilingual backgrounds have higher levels of intrinsic motivation. The second hypothesis states that autonomy, competence, and relatedness supporting activities (i.e., cultural, creative, and interactive) positively associate with intrinsic motivation, whereas other types of activities (i.e. tactile and movement) positively associate with extrinsic motivation.

The Role of Language Background in Motivational Orientations

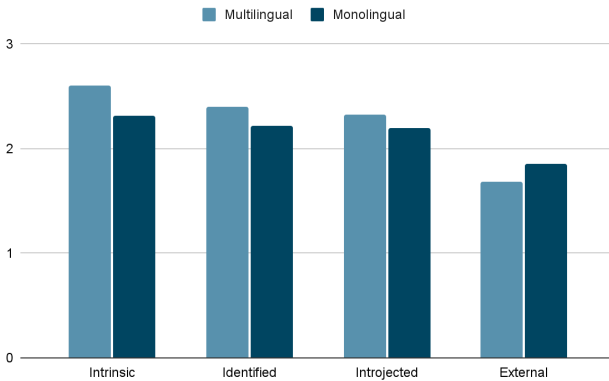
To test the first hypothesis concerning the relationship between students’ language background (multilingual vs. monolingual) and motivational orientation, a 2 (language background: multilingual vs. monolingual) × 4 (motivational orientation: intrinsic, identified, introjected, extrinsic) mixed-design ANOVA was conducted. Motivational orientation served as the within-subjects factor, and language background served as the between-subjects factor. The analysis revealed a significant main effect of motivational orientation, $F(3, 55) = 19.23, p < .0001$, partial $\eta^2 = .512$. Pairwise comparisons indicated that students reported the highest levels of intrinsic motivation ($M = 2.47, SD = 0.50$), followed by identified motivation ($M = 2.32, SD = 0.46$), introjected motivation ($M = 2.29, SD = 0.37$), and extrinsic motivation ($M = 1.76, SD = 0.47$).

MOTIVATING ELEMENTARY STUDENTS TO LEARN LANGUAGES

The main effect of language background was not significant, $F(1, 57) = 1.75$, $p = .192$, partial $\eta^2 = .03$. However, the interaction between language background and motivational orientation was significant, $F(3, 171) = 3.61$, $p = .015$, partial $\eta^2 = .06$. Specifically, multilingual students reported higher levels of intrinsic, identified, and introjected motivation than monolingual students, whereas monolingual students reported higher levels of extrinsic motivation (see Figure 1). These findings support the first hypothesis that students from multilingual backgrounds have higher levels of intrinsic motivation.

Figure 1

Mean Levels of Motivational Orientation by Language Background



Classroom Activities and Student Intrinsic Motivation

To test the second hypothesis concerning the relationship between students' language background (multilingual vs. monolingual) and intrinsic motivation towards different activities, a 2 (language background: multilingual vs. monolingual) \times 5 (activity type: cultural exposure, interactive, creative, tactile, movement) mixed-design ANOVA was conducted. Activity type served as the within-subjects factor, and language background served as the between-subjects factor.

The main effect of activity type was significant, $F(4, 228) = 22.4$, $p < .01$, partial $\eta^2 = 28.2\%$, suggesting that activity type substantially contributed to intrinsic motivation. Descriptively, tactile activities received the highest ratings ($M = 2.64$, $SD = 0.46$), followed by interactive activities ($M = 2.49$, $SD = 0.50$), cultural exposure ($M = 2.43$, $SD = 0.52$), movement-based activities ($M = 2.27$, $SD = 0.66$), and creative activities ($M = 1.85$, $SD = 0.62$).

There was no significant main effect for home language on students' intrinsic motivation toward activities, $F(1,57) = 2.57$, $p = .11$. However, interaction between their intrinsic motivation towards types of activities and home language is borderline significant, $F(4, 228) = 2.12$, $p = .08$, partial $\eta^2 = 3.6\%$, which seem to suggest that students with multilingual backgrounds benefited more from cultural exposure and creative activities than students with monolingual backgrounds (see figure 1). Moreover, multilingual students reported higher engagement with cultural exposure ($M = 2.59$, $SD = 0.44$) and creative activities ($M = 2.00$, $SD = 0.59$) compared to monolingual students ($M = 2.23$, $SD = 0.57$; $M = 1.67$, $SD = 0.62$, respectively).

Figure 2

Pearson correlations between classroom activity types (rows) and motivational orientations (columns)

Variable	Cultural Exposure	Interactive	Creative	Tactile	Movement
Intrinsic	.51**	.20	.30*	.21	.13
Identified	.38**	.33*	.31*	.19	.30*
Introjected	.34**	.39**	.25	.32*	.35**
External	.02	.08	.09	.27*	.17

Note: *: $P < .05$; **: $P < .01$

To further test the second hypothesis, Pearson correlations were calculated between students’ motivational orientations and their reported interest in different classroom activity types. Results indicated significant positive associations between intrinsic motivation and cultural exposure ($r = .51, p < .01$) and creative activities ($r = .30, p < .05$). Identified regulation was positively correlated with cultural exposure ($r = .38, p < .01$), interactive ($r = .33, p < .05$), creative ($r = .31, p < .05$), and movement-based activities ($r = .30, p < .05$). Introjected regulation correlated positively with cultural exposure ($r = .34, p < .01$), interactive ($r = .39, p < .01$), tactile ($r = .32, p < .05$), and movement-based activities ($r = .35, p < .01$). External regulation was positively correlated only with tactile activities ($r = .27, p < .05$).

Discussion of Quantitative Results

The first hypothesis predicted that students from multilingual backgrounds would report higher levels of intrinsic motivation than monolingual students. Although both monolingual and multilingual students had more self-determined forms of motivation than not, multilingual students had higher intrinsic motivation levels on average.

These findings support the first hypothesis, aligning with prior work showing that multilingual learners are more open to acquiring additional languages (Kroll & Dussias, 2017). This finding suggests that the effectiveness of activities may vary depending on elementary language learners’ backgrounds. Specifically, multilingual students showed higher interest on average in *cultural exposure* and *creative* activities than monolingual students, indicating that language background can influence elementary students’ engagement with different activities in the classroom. In this context, cultural exposure activities are activities that involve learning about traditions or daily life in Spanish-speaking communities, while creative activities allow students to experiment with expressing their own ideas in Spanish. One possible explanation for multilingual students’ greater engagement with these activities is that they may already perceive language as closely connected to culture and identity, making cultural learning feel more meaningful, while prior experience using multiple languages may increase their comfort with experimenting in creative language tasks.

The second hypothesis predicted that autonomy, competence, and relatedness supporting activities (creative, cultural, and interactive) would be positively associated with intrinsic motivation, whereas tactile and movement-based activities

MOTIVATING ELEMENTARY STUDENTS TO LEARN LANGUAGES

would be positively associated with extrinsic motivation. Correlation analyses showed that cultural exposure activities were positively associated with intrinsic motivation. Consistent with Self-Determination Theory, cultural learning may support relatedness needs by increasing students' sense of connection to Spanish-speaking communities, as described in previous research (Dörnyei, 1994). Creative activities correlated with intrinsic motivation as well, consistent with their potential to satisfy autonomy needs by allowing students to customize and generate their own language use. Interactive activities correlated most strongly with identified and introjected regulation. Identified regulation refers to someone performing an activity because they have identified its importance, and introjected regulation is a slightly less autonomous form of motivation, which refers to someone performing a task due to pressure they have put on themselves (Ryan & Deci, 2000b). Thus, these findings suggest that while interactive activities may not fully foster intrinsic interest, they do engage students who recognize the value of language learning and have baseline motivation. These findings align with Dörnyei (1974), who recommended autonomy-, competence-, and relatedness-supporting activities to support elementary language learners.

In contrast, tactile and movement-based activities were most strongly associated with introjected and external regulation, with external regulation being the least autonomous form of motivation, when someone performs a task to satisfy an external demand. Thus, these findings indicate that tactile and movement-based activities may be particularly effective for sparking situational engagement among students with lower intrinsic motivation. While they may not foster long-term intrinsic interest in language learning, they can spark students' motivation and participation in the moment. This pattern is consistent with prior research showing that games and movement-based activities promote classroom engagement and help students feel more comfortable participating (Bernard, 2010; Sevy, 2016; Valero et al., 2022; Young, 1991). Moreover, while they do not directly fulfil autonomy or relatedness to the same degree as cultural or creative activities, student qualitative responses, as discussed in the following subsection, indicated that they allow them to work competitively and strategically, fulfilling competence needs.

Overall, these results confirm the second hypothesis: autonomy-, competence-, and relatedness-supporting activities were associated with higher forms of autonomous motivation. Moreover, fun and game-based, tactile, and movement activities were found to support student competence needs as well as be highly engaging for less motivated students.

Qualitative Survey Results and Discussion

Qualitative responses provided further insight into how certain activities can motivate students to learn a foreign language.

Specific games such as card games and charades, and "playing games" in general, were frequently cited as favorites, not only because they were enjoyable but also because they allowed for friendly competition and collaborative learning. Students repeatedly described these activities as stress-reducing and creating a positive classroom atmosphere. Illustrative student responses included: "It's hard to learn a new language and it's fun to have a small break in between". Another student noted, "They create a fun environment in the classroom". With regards to movement-based activities, such as Hachi Pachi, a movement-based guessing game with the class acting as one team, specifically, students commonly described them as energizing. One student explained, "They help me stay focused." These responses suggest how fun and game-based activities, which often include tactile

and movement-based elements, can lower students' affective filters by making them feel more comfortable in the classroom, thereby engaging them. Multiple students also described enjoying game-based activities because they enjoyed the strategic and competitive aspects of them. As one student explained, they "like[d] to use [their] knowledge competitively." Such responses indicate how fun and game-based activities also satisfy students' competence needs, by allowing them to apply their language knowledge and demonstrating their proficiency, thereby motivating them to participate.

Activities with interactive elements, such as Hachi Pachi, a movement-based guessing game with the class acting as one team, and Eggspert, a team-based quiz game, were also popular among students, with three students even listing working with others as a favorite activity of theirs. Students commonly described how they feel more comfortable working in group settings. One student said, "I like working with my friends because I like being with them," while another said, "I work better with them." These sentiments illustrate how interactive activities can lower students' affective filters by reducing the anxiety they may feel in uncomfortable social environments, thereby increasing their willingness to engage and participate.

While not as popular as fun and games and interactive activities, many students still cited creative activities, such as projects, writing stories, and skits, as favorites. Student responses indicated that they enjoy these activities because they have the opportunity to apply and create with their knowledge. One student, specifically, said, "I like doing projects because I like making things." Another explained, "I like skits because they allow you to be creative." These responses demonstrate how creative activities can fulfill students' SDT autonomy needs by allowing them to express their own ideas and make choices about how they use the target language.

Students did not frequently cite cultural exposure activities, such as learning about traditions and different holidays in countries that speak the target language, as favorites. Students that did describe such activities as favorites did so because they found them "fun", "interesting", and "exciting". One student said, "Learning about different countries is cool because you can take a trip there," indicating that cultural exposure activities showed them the value of the language that they were learning as a means to communicate with people from different communities. This description demonstrates how, though less popular, cultural exposure activities can support students' SDT-relatedness needs by helping them feel connected to speakers of the target language and their communities.

Overall, these qualitative observations reinforce the quantitative findings: while activities such as cultural exposure and creative projects appear to foster deeper, autonomous forms of motivation, fun and game-based activities and interactive activities serve an essential complementary function, by sparking situational engagement among less autonomously motivated students.

General Discussion

The overall purpose of this study was to identify activities and strategies that influence elementary students' motivational orientation toward second language learning. This subject is important because learning a foreign language earlier can improve later proficiency (Rubio, 2022). Motivation is key to language proficiency, as motivated learners progress faster and are more likely to continue learning (Hiver et al., 2024).

Using an exploratory sequential mixed-methods design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018), Study 1 employed teacher interviews and classroom observations to provide preliminary insights into language classroom engagement practices and

MOTIVATING ELEMENTARY STUDENTS TO LEARN LANGUAGES

informed the design of Study 2. Study 1 revealed a number of different activities that teachers use to engage their students: Fun and games, which include both *tactile* (e.g. Board and card games) and *movement-based* (ex, dancing and charades) activities; *creative* activities (e.g. projects, skits, and writing stories); and *interactive* activities (e.g. working in partnerships, small groups, or as a class). These activity choices align with past research recommendations (Bernard, 2010; Dörnyei, 1994; Sevy, 2016; Valero et al., 2022; Young, 1991). Students were later surveyed about these activities in Study 2, with the addition of one activity category, *cultural exposure* activities, or activities that expose students to the culture and history of the target language, due to its prominence in motivation literature (Brophy, 2008; Dörnyei, 1994).

Study 2 utilized student surveys, including both closed- and open-ended questions, to obtain a more comprehensive understanding of student motivation and activity preferences. *Fun-* and *game-based* activities, of both tactile and movement-based nature, were among the most engaging for students, aligning with previous research which identifies fun activities as motivating for students (Dörnyei, 1994; Bernard, 2010; Sevy-Billoon, 2017). *Interactive* activities were also highly engaging, confirming previous findings, and fulfilling the SDT need for relatedness (Sevy, 2016; Dörnyei, 1994; Ryan & Deci, 2000a). Notably, this study suggests that these activities are especially effective at sparking situational engagement among students, as reflected in students' descriptions and high ratings of these activities as stress-reducing and enjoyable, consistent with the affective filter hypothesis.

Teachers noted that students also seemed to be very engaged in activities with *creative* elements, which student qualitative responses confirmed. These findings are consistent with Bernard's (2010) findings and self-determination theory because creative activities fulfill autonomy needs (Bernard, 2010). However, student quantitative responses diverged, indicating low popularity. This discrepancy may be explained by the way this category was represented in the quantitative survey (see Limitations). Quantitative survey responses also indicated that *cultural exposure* activities were less popular, and they were mentioned less frequently as favorite activities in students' qualitative responses. These findings contrast with prior research suggesting that cultural exposure activities should engage students by highlighting the relevance of language learning and fostering a sense of connection to the target-language community, thereby fulfilling SDT relatedness needs (Dörnyei, 1994; Ryan & Deci, 2000a; Brophy, 2008). Thus, in the present study, cultural exposure activities may not have been perceived by students as especially engaging or personally meaningful.

Individual differences also appeared to influence student engagement with these activities. Results from the mixed-design ANOVA indicated that multilingual students in this study appear to be more intrinsically motivated than monolingual students, aligning with previous research, which found that multilingual students are generally more open to learning new languages (Kroll & Dussias, 2017). Correlation analyses indicated that *creative* and *cultural exposure* activities appear to be more popular among intrinsically motivated students, while *fun and games* are more popular among extrinsically motivated students.

Overall, these findings highlight the importance of incorporating a variety of activity types to support different motivational orientations among elementary language learners. By balancing autonomy-, competence-, and relatedness-supporting activities, educators can create classroom environments that foster both immediate engagement and sustained interest in language learning.

Limitations and Future Directions

This study has several limitations. First, participants (teachers and students) were all from the same school district, and student survey participants were all fifth graders, meaning there was potentially less diversity in responses. A similar study could be replicated in a different context to see if results are consistent.

Second, the survey design had limitations. Only a three-point Likert scale was used compared to a five-point or seven-point Likert scale, so less nuance was shown. Additionally, survey items included specific examples to represent each category, which may have shaped how students interpreted the options (e.g., ‘movement-based activities’ was illustrated with ‘charades or dancing’). This could explain discrepancies between students’ quantitative and qualitative responses.

Third, only two observations were conducted, which reduces the validity of their findings and limits the robustness of data triangulation. A future study could observe more classrooms across grade levels and school districts to gain a more holistic understanding of the elementary language classroom.

However, despite these limitations, the study’s wide variety of data collection methods and perspectives, including quantitative and qualitative survey responses from students, teacher interviews, and classroom observations, leads to holistic and impactful findings.

Future research could expand on this study in several ways. Longitudinal studies tracking students over multiple years could examine whether short-term engagement with different activities translates into sustained motivation and long-term language proficiency. Experimental or quasi-experimental designs would allow for a more direct investigation of cause-and-effect relationships between specific activity types and student motivation or learning outcomes. Including a broader range of grade levels, school contexts, and student backgrounds would test the generalizability of these findings. Future studies could also concentrate more on individual differences, such as prior language experience, personality traits, age differences, or baseline motivation levels, to better understand how these factors shape engagement and responsiveness to classroom activities.

Implications

This study suggests that activities fulfilling students’ Self-Determination Theory needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness can enhance engagement in elementary language classrooms, though individual differences should also be considered. Together, the findings indicate that no single activity type is sufficient to support motivation for all learners, highlighting the importance of incorporating a range of instructional strategies. These findings have implications for both classroom instructional design and language teacher education.

Specific types of activities appear to support different motivational needs. *Creative* activities such as projects, skits, and storywriting support autonomy by allowing students to experiment with language in meaningful ways. *Cultural exposure* activities, such as learning about traditions, foods, or daily life in target-language communities, can support competence and relatedness needs by helping students understand how language functions in real-world contexts and by fostering connections to speakers of the language. However, the present findings suggest that these activities may be particularly engaging for students who are already intrinsically motivated or who come from multilingual backgrounds.

Interactive activities, such as partner and group work, support relatedness by providing opportunities for collaboration and communication. These activities may be especially valuable for students who feel uncomfortable participating in front of large groups by lowering their affective filters. Interactive activities

MOTIVATING ELEMENTARY STUDENTS TO LEARN LANGUAGES

can also be combined with *tactile* or *movement-based* activities to create fun and game-like learning experiences, such as Eggspert, Hachi Pachi, or charades, which may be particularly helpful for engaging students with lower initial intrinsic motivation by reducing anxiety and encouraging participation.

These findings suggest that elementary language educators may create an engaging classroom environment by incorporating different types of activities. For example, fun, game-based, and interactive activities may help establish a supportive classroom environment and encourage participation among less intrinsically motivated students, while creative and cultural activities may help sustain longer-term interest in language learning by promoting meaningful engagement with the language.

The findings also have implications for language teacher education programs. Teacher preparation and professional development programs may benefit from explicitly addressing how different classroom activities support distinct motivational needs. By helping teachers understand how to design lessons that incorporate a range of autonomy-, competence-, and relatedness-supporting activities, they will be better prepared to meet the needs of diverse learners in elementary language classrooms.

Overall, incorporating a variety of activity types may help educators create inclusive and motivating language learning environments that support both immediate engagement and sustained motivation for language learning.

Acknowledgements

The first author would like to thank Dr. Niu and Ms. Leech for their unwavering support and guidance. The first author is also grateful to the teachers who welcomed them into their classrooms and shared invaluable insights into elementary language education. Finally, the first author would like to thank their school administration for supporting them and making this project possible.

Ethical Approval

This study involving human participants was conducted in accordance with institutional ethical standards and received institutional approval.

Competing Interests

Authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

References

- Ainley, M. (2012). Students' interest and engagement in classroom activities. *Handbook of Research on Student Engagement*, 283–302. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4614-2018-7_13
- Ando, F., Fuse, M., & Hideshi Kodaira. (2008). Motivation and elementary school pupils' positive class participation. *Japanese Journal of Educational Psychology*, 56(2), 160–170. https://doi.org/10.5926/jjep1953.56.2_160
- Bernard, J. (2010). Motivation in foreign language learning: The relationship between classroom activities, motivation, and outcomes in a university language-learning environment. <https://doi.org/10.1184/r1/6686228.v1>
- Brega, E., & Newell, J. M. (1967). High school performance of FLES and NonFLES students. *The Modern Language Journal*, 51(7), 408–411. JSTOR. <https://doi.org/10.2307/321611>
- Blaz, D. (2022). *The World Language Teacher's Guide to Active Learning*.

NECTFL Review Number 96

- Bowen, J. D. (1958). The Success of FLES. *Hispania*, 41(3), 351. <https://doi.org/10.2307/334825>
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*. <https://psycnet.apa.org/record/2006-06991-002>
- Carreira, J. M. (2012). Motivational orientations and psychological needs in EFL learning among elementary school students in Japan. *System*, 40(2), 191–202. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.system.2012.02.001>
- Creswell, J. W., & Plano Clark, V. L. (2018). *Designing and conducting mixed methods research* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.
- Dincer, A., & Savas Yesilyurt. (2017). Motivation to speak English: A self-determination theory perspective. *PASAA: A Journal of Language Teaching and Learning*, 53(1), 1–25. <https://doi.org/10.58837/chula.pasaa.53.1.1>
- Dörnyei, Z. (1994). Motivation and motivating in the foreign language classroom. *The Modern Language Journal*, 78(3), 273–284.
- Du, X. (2009). The Affective Filter in second language teaching. *Asian Social Science*, 5(8), 162–165. <https://doi.org/10.5539/ass.v5n8p162>
- Hiver, P., Al-Hoorie, A. H., Vitta, J., & Wu, J. (2024). Engagement in language learning: A systematic review of 20 years of research methods and definitions. *ResearchGate; SAGE*. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/350159322_Engagement_in_language_learning_A_systematic_review_of_20_years_of_research_methods_and_definitions
- Jordan, J., Clarke, S. O., & Coates, W. C. (2021). A practical guide for conducting qualitative research in education: Part 1—How to interview. *AEM Education and Training*, 5(3). <https://doi.org/10.1002/act2.10646>
- Kennedy, T. J., Nelson, J. K., Odell, M. R. L., & Austin, L. K. (2000). The FLES attitudinal inventory. *Foreign Language Annals*, 33(3), 278–289. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1944-9720.2000.tb00606.x>
- Krashen, S. D. (1982). Principles and practice in second language acquisition. *The Modern Language Journal*, 67(2). https://www.sdkrashen.com/content/books/principles_and_practice.pdf
- Kroll, J. F., & Dussias, P. E. (2017). The benefits of multilingualism to the personal and professional development of residents of the US. *Foreign Language Annals*, 50(2), 248–259. <https://doi.org/10.1111/flan.12271>
- McAuley, E., Duncan, T., & Tammen, V. V. (1987). Psychometric properties of the Intrinsic Motivation Inventory in a competitive sport setting: A confirmatory factor analysis. *Research Quarterly for Exercise and Sport*, 60, 48–58.
- Meece, J. L., Blumenfeld, P. C., & Hoyle, R. H. (1988). Students' goal orientations and cognitive engagement in classroom activities. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 80(4), 514.
- Merriam, S. B. (1998). *Qualitative research and case study applications in education. Revised/Expanded from Case study research in education*. Jossey-Bass Publishers. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED415771>
- Oga-Baldwin, W. L. Q., Nakata, Y., Parker, P., & Ryan, R. M. (2017). Motivating young language learners: A longitudinal model of self-determined motivation in elementary school foreign language classes. *Contemporary Educational Psychology*, 49, 140–150. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cedpsych.2017.01.010>
- Reeves, J. (1989, September). Elementary school foreign language programs [Review of elementary school foreign language programs]. *Cal.org*. <https://www.cal.org/earlylang/progdev/reeves.html>

MOTIVATING ELEMENTARY STUDENTS TO LEARN LANGUAGES

- Rubio, F. (2022). ACTFL | The impact of early language learning. *ACTFL*. <https://www.actfl.org/research/research-briefs/the-impact-of-early-language-learning>
- Ryan, R. M. (1982). Control and information in the intrapersonal sphere: An extension of cognitive evaluation theory. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 43(3), 450–461. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.43.3.450>
- Ryan, R. M., & Deci, E. L. (2000a). Self-determination theory and the facilitation of intrinsic motivation, social development, and well-being. *American Psychologist*, 55(1), 68–78. https://selfdeterminationtheory.org/SDT/documents/2000_RyanDeci_SDT.pdf
- Ryan, R. M., & Deci, E. L. (2000b). Intrinsic and extrinsic motivations: Classic definitions and new directions. *Contemporary Educational Psychology*, 25(1), 54–67.
- Ryan, S. (2020). Motivation and individual differences. *Springer EBooks*, 163–182. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-28380-3_8
- Sandström Kjellin, M., & Granlund, M. (2006). Children’s engagement in different classroom activities. *European Journal of Special Needs Education*, 21(3), 285–300.
- Sevy, J. (2016). Teaching a large multi-level class using different strategies and activities to motivate English language learning. *Studies in English Language and Education*, 3(2), 91–99.
- Sevy-Biloon, J. (n.d.). Different reasons to play games in an English language class. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1124640>
- Sharma, L. R., Bidari, S., Bidari, D., Neupane, S., & Sapkota, R. (2023). Exploring the mixed methods research design: Types, purposes, strengths, challenges, and criticisms. *Global Academic Journal of Linguistics and Literature*, 5(1), 3–12. <https://doi.org/10.36348/gajll.2023.v05i01.002>
- Valero, G. G., Ruz, R. P., Molina, R. G., & Ubago, L. (2022). Physical activity and movement integrated into the second language teaching from an early age: a systematic review. *Retos: Nuevas Tendencias En Educación Física, Deporte Y Recreación*, 44, 876–888. <https://dialnet.unirioja.es/descarga/articulo/8257024.pdf>
- Young, D. J. (1991). Creating a low-anxiety classroom environment: What does language anxiety research suggest? *The Modern Language Journal*, 75(4), 426–439.

Appendix A

Sample Interview Questions by Theme

FLES Class Structure:

- What defines FLES programs?
- What is the goal of FLES programs?
- What classroom activities do you often see in FLES programs?

Classroom Activities:

- What classroom activities do you most often do with your students?
- What classroom activities engage your students the most?

Student Engagement:

- How do you approach motivating students?
- How motivated are your students?

Appendix B

Motivation Questionnaire

Why are you learning Spanish? Decide how much you agree or disagree with each statement.

I learn Spanish because...

1. I learn Spanish because I like knowing more things
2. I learn Spanish because I want to be praised by my parents and teachers
3. I learn Spanish because it seems to be a rule to do so
4. I learn Spanish because I want my teacher to see me as a good student
5. If I learn Spanish now, I might be glad I did when I'm older.
6. I learn Spanish because it will be useful for me in the future
7. I learn Spanish because I think it is important to study Spanish as a part of life
8. I learn Spanish because I might feel proud of myself for learning it when I'm older.
9. I learn Spanish because I feel happy when I get my schoolwork done
10. It is important for me to learn Spanish.

1. I learn Spanish because it is fun to
2. I learn Spanish because I like to learn new things
3. I learn Spanish because I want to make my parent and teachers happy by learning Spanish
4. I learn Spanish because it is interesting to know different things
5. I learn Spanish because I am told to
6. I learn Spanish because it will be useful for me in middle school

Appendix C

Activities Questionnaire

Close-Ended Items

Please read the statement which names something you might do in Spanish class. After, please indicate if you find doing that thing *fun* or *interesting*.

Learning about what life is like in Spanish-speaking countries

1. This is fun.
 2. This is really interesting
- Working with a partner or a small group

3. This is fun.
 4. This is really interesting
- Talking about my life in Spanish

5. This is fun
 6. This is really interesting
- Playing games like bingo, card games, and board games

7. This is fun
 8. This is interesting
- Doing things like charades or dancing

9. This is fun
10. This is interesting

MOTIVATING ELEMENTARY STUDENTS TO LEARN LANGUAGES

Open-Ended Items

1. What are three of your favorite things to do in Spanish class (apart from online games like Blooket or Gimkit)?
2. Optional: Explain why you like them in 1-2 sentences.

Joyce Liu is a senior at Scarsdale High School and the founder of *Worldly*, a nonprofit that develops research-informed resources to promote language learning. Through *Worldly*, she works with educational organizations globally, including the American University of Central Asia and LingoAce. Her research focuses on educational psychology and youth mental health, and has been presented at the UNICEF conference *Bold Ideas for Brighter Futures* and published in the Columbia-WHO Center's *Bridging the Divide* compendium.

Weihua Niu is a Professor in the Department of Psychology and Director of Global Psychology at Pace University. She is internationally recognized for her research on creativity, intelligence, critical thinking, mathematical thinking and learning, learning difficulties, resilience, social skills, and the cultural influences on learning and cognition. She has published more than 60 academic papers in these areas. Her recent editorial work includes the two-volume collection *Critical Thinking Across Disciplines* (Sternberg & Niu, 2025), published by Palgrave Macmillan.

