



Motivation and Engagement Strategies in Junior High School English Language Classrooms: Ghanaian Teachers and Learners' Perspectives

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Abstract

This study explored the experiences of Junior High School (JHS) teachers of English in Ghana as manifested through their motivation and engagement in everyday classroom practice. Grounded in Self-Determination Theory and Engagement Theory, the study adopted a qualitative multiple case study design. Data were generated from semi-structured interviews with ten teachers of English and 20 JHS learners from public and private schools in Kpando municipality, and from classroom observations of routine English lessons. Thematic analysis was used to identify patterns across the data. Findings showed that teachers relied mainly on praise, questioning, group work, code-switching between English and Ewe, and game-based activities to stimulate learners' interest. These strategies tended to enhance behavioural and emotional engagement, although opportunities for deeper cognitive engagement were less frequent. Teachers also reported contextual constraints, including large classes, limited teaching resources, and learners' low proficiency, which sometimes reduced their capacity to sustain motivation. Learners valued supportive teacher-student relationships, clear explanations, and varied activities, but expressed frustration with excessive teacher talk and chorus responses. The study highlights the need for targeted professional development on motivational and engagement-oriented pedagogy in Ghanaian JHS English language classrooms and offers context-specific recommendations for curriculum planners and teacher educators.

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Introduction

English holds a central position in Ghana as both an official language and the main medium of instruction from upper primary onwards. Success in national examinations and access to further education and employment are closely tied to learners' proficiency in English. Yet, many Junior High School (JHS) learners, particularly those in public and rural schools, continue to struggle with English, which affects their confidence, participation and achievement across the curriculum. In semi-urban and rural areas such as the Kpando Municipality, English is often used mainly at school and is seldom the language of everyday interaction. This limited exposure makes learning more demanding and can widen disparities between learners in public and private schools.

Over the years, educational reforms in Ghana have consistently positioned English as a core subject and a marker of quality education. Policy documents and curriculum revisions emphasise the



development of communicative competence and academic literacy in English, with teachers expected to nurture learners who can speak, read and write confidently in diverse contexts. Despite this emphasis, research and public examination results indicate persistent challenges in English language learning, including low proficiency, limited learner participation and teacher-centred classroom practices. These challenges are often intensified by large classes, mixed-ability groups and constrained resources, especially in public schools.

In this context, motivation and engagement are crucial. Motivation can be seen as the force that initiates, directs and sustains learning behaviour. Self-Determination Theory (SDT) positions motivation along a continuum from amotivation, through different forms of extrinsic motivation, to intrinsic motivation, and proposes that learners are more likely to invest effort when their needs for autonomy, competence and relatedness are supported (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Ryan & Deci, 2020). In JHS English classrooms, these needs are expressed in learners' desire for meaningful choice, a sense of progress and positive relationships with teachers and peers.

Engagement is closely related to, but distinct from, motivation. It is commonly described as a multidimensional construct with behavioural, emotional and cognitive aspects (Fredricks, et al., 2004; Mercer & Dörnyei, 2020). Behavioural engagement involves attendance, attention and participation; emotional engagement concerns interest, enjoyment and sense of belonging; and cognitive engagement relates to sustained effort and strategic thinking. Engagement Theory (Kearsley & Shneiderman, 1998) highlights the importance of active, collaborative and authentic learning tasks in sustaining engagement, particularly when these tasks connect with learners' real-world experiences and encourage project-like work.

In language education, these ideas have been developed further in research on second language motivation and learner engagement. Studies in diverse settings suggest that learners' motivation is shaped not only by internal interests and future goals but also by classroom climate, teacher support and peer relations (Masinde, Barasa & Mandillah, 2023; Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2021; Al-Hoorie & MacIntyre, 2020; Lamb, 2017). Engagement is understood as co-constructed through teacher-learner and peer interaction, rather than as an individual trait (Philp & Duchesne, 2016; Mercer, 2021). Interactive activities, authentic and culturally relevant materials, and constructive feedback have been shown to support both motivation and engagement, although large classes and resource constraints often limit the extent to which such approaches can be implemented consistently.

In Ghana, much of the research on English language education has focused on language-in-education policy, curriculum implementation and general classroom challenges (Owu-Ewie, 2006; Opoku-Amankwa & Brew-Hammond, 2011). Less attention has been paid to how teachers and learners in basic schools experience motivation and engagement in everyday English lessons, and how these experiences differ across public and private school contexts. Existing work on motivation in second language learning is often survey-based and conducted outside Africa, with relatively few qualitative studies that foreground teachers' and learners' voices in Ghanaian classrooms.

This study responds to these gaps by drawing on Self-Determination Theory and Engagement Theory to explore motivation and engagement in JHS English lessons in the Kpando Municipality. It examines how teachers attempt to motivate learners and foster engagement in their routine classroom practice, how learners respond to these efforts, and how contextual conditions shape what is possible in public and private basic schools. The study is guided by three research questions:

1. What factors motivate JHS learners to learn English in the classroom?
2. What strategies do English language teachers use to enhance learners' engagement in classroom activities?



3. How do learners perceive English language learning as engaging and meaningful?

Methodology

The study adopted a qualitative multiple case study design to explore how English language teachers and learners in public and private JHSs in the Kpando Municipality understand and enact motivation and engagement. A qualitative approach was appropriate because the study sought rich accounts of classroom practices and participants' perceptions rather than statistical generalisation (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Treating each school as a case allowed the particularities of its context to be examined in depth and then compared across cases (Stake, 2020).

Ten JHSs (public and private) were purposively selected to capture variation in location, school type and resource levels. From these schools, ten English language teachers and twenty learners participated in the study. Teachers were selected on the basis of their involvement in teaching English at the JHS level. With teachers' support, learners were purposively chosen to include both boys and girls who were actively involved in English lessons. This sampling strategy was intended to foreground participants who could speak about motivation and engagement from direct experience (Creswell & Creswell, 2023).

Data were generated through semi-structured interviews and classroom observations. Interviews with teachers explored their understanding of learner motivation, the strategies they employed to foster engagement and the constraints they faced. Interviews with learners focused on what they found motivating or demotivating in English lessons and how they experienced classroom activities. Classroom observations documented teaching methods, learner participation and teacher-learner interactions in routine English lessons. Observations provided contextual evidence to complement interview accounts and to show how reported strategies were enacted in practice (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Yin, 2018).

Before the main study, interview guides and an observation checklist were piloted in one basic school outside the sample. The pilot helped to refine questions, adjust wording and ensure that the instruments were appropriate for JHS learners. Feedback from the pilot informed minor changes in the sequence and phrasing of questions, which strengthened the clarity and usability of the tools (Creswell & Creswell, 2023; Patton, 2020).

Trustworthiness was addressed through attention to credibility, dependability, confirmability and transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 2020). Credibility was enhanced by drawing on more than one data source and by checking that emerging interpretations remained consistent with participants' accounts. Dependability was supported by keeping detailed records of sampling decisions, data generation procedures and analytic steps. Confirmability was promoted by grounding interpretations in participants' words and observed classroom practices rather than in the researcher's preferences. Transferability was facilitated by providing sufficient contextual detail on the schools and classroom environments to allow readers to judge the applicability of the findings to other settings.

Data analysis followed the principles of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Interview transcripts and observation notes were read and re-read to build familiarity, and initial codes were generated to capture recurring ideas related to motivation, engagement and classroom strategies. Codes were then grouped into candidate themes, which were reviewed, refined and named through an iterative process. Themes were compared within and across cases to identify similarities and differences between public and private schools and to explore how motivational and engagement-focused strategies were expressed in different classrooms.



Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant institutional structures. Informed consent was sought from all participating teachers and from learners and their guardians, and pseudonyms were used to protect identities. Participation was voluntary, and participants were informed that they could withdraw at any time without penalty. Care was taken to minimise disruption to teaching and learning, and data were stored securely.

Findings

This section presents the main findings in relation to the three research questions. The results are organised under three themes: factors that motivate learners, strategies teachers use to enhance engagement, and learners' perceptions of meaningful English learning. Examples are drawn from both public and private JHS classrooms in the Kpando Municipality.

Factors Motivating Learners

Learners' motivation to learn English was shaped by a blend of personal interest, external incentives, social influences and classroom conditions. Many learners in both public and private schools described genuine enjoyment of English. They spoke of liking stories, learning new words and feeling proud when they could answer questions or read aloud without help. These accounts point to intrinsic motivation grounded in interest and a sense of competence.

At the same time, extrinsic motives were strongly present. Learners frequently mentioned the Basic Education Certificate Examination (BECE), future careers and parental expectations as key reasons for working hard in English. Some expressed a desire to make their parents proud or to secure places in well-regarded secondary schools. Praise and public recognition from teachers also mattered: learners said that being clapped for or having their names written on the board encouraged them to participate more actively.

Social relationships were critical. Learners felt more motivated when teachers were approachable, listened to questions and explained concepts patiently. Teachers who smiled, moved around the classroom and encouraged "trying" even when answers were not perfect were described as kind and supportive. In contrast, frequent shouting, rapid pacing and heavy reliance on chorus responses made some learners reluctant to speak. Peer influence was similarly double-edged. Working with classmates in pairs or small groups often boosted confidence, but fear of being laughed at for mistakes sometimes led learners to remain silent in whole-class discussions.

The physical and material conditions of classrooms also influenced motivation. In private schools, smaller classes and greater access to textbooks, charts and, in some cases, digital resources allowed for more varied activities and individual attention. Public school classes were often larger and more crowded, with limited materials and considerable noise. These constraints made it harder for learners to hear, see the board and remain focused, although some teachers nonetheless used creative examples and simple drawings to sustain interest. Overall, learners' motivation emerged as a product of intrinsic and extrinsic factors, social relationships and classroom conditions rather than as an individual trait.

Strategies Teachers Use to Enhance Engagement

Teachers reported and were observed using a range of strategies to keep learners engaged in English lessons. Interactive teaching methods were common across both school types. These included group discussions, pair work, role plays, short debates and question-and-answer sessions. When learners were given opportunities to move, talk and contribute ideas, they tended to be more alert and responsive. In private schools, smaller class sizes made it easier to call individual learners to the front to act out dialogues or present written work. Public school teachers relied more on whole-class



questioning and choral responses but incorporated pair or group activities when space and time permitted.

Teachers also sought to make lessons meaningful by drawing on authentic and culturally familiar materials. They used examples from learners' communities, local stories, radio programmes and everyday scenes such as market transactions and church events. Learners responded positively when they recognised situations and characters in lesson content, often volunteering personal experiences and using English to describe them. These practices were supported by conscious scaffolding: teachers modelled answers, broke tasks into smaller steps, provided key vocabulary and, in some cases, used simple visual aids to support comprehension.

A further strategy was the creation of a supportive classroom climate. Many teachers greeted learners warmly, used their names and acknowledged effort as well as correct answers. Structured peer collaboration was encouraged through group tasks where learners shared ideas before responding to the whole-class. Learners indicated that they felt more confident when they could "discuss with my friend" first, and observations suggested that such collaboration reduced anxiety about speaking English. However, in some large classes, a few learners dominated group work while others remained quiet, indicating that peer activities were most effective when tasks were clearly structured and teachers monitored participation.

Code-switching between English and Ewe was another important feature. Teachers used Ewe strategically to clarify instructions, explain challenging vocabulary and check comprehension. Learners reported that this helped them to follow tasks and feel less lost, especially when new content was introduced. In turn, this appeared to support their willingness to engage in subsequent English-only activities.

Learners' Perceptions of Meaningful English Learning

Learners' descriptions of meaningful English lessons centred on relevance, enjoyment and perceived contribution to their goals. Lessons were viewed as meaningful when they connected clearly to everyday communication, for example, through activities that involved describing familiar places, acting out conversations or writing letters. Learners felt that such tasks prepared them to use English "in real-life", beyond examinations.

Enjoyment was also central. Learners spoke enthusiastically about games, songs, storytelling and friendly competitions, saying that these activities reduced anxiety and made it easier to remember vocabulary and structures. They looked forward to English lessons when they knew that such tasks would be included. For them, fun did not mean the absence of learning; rather, it made difficult work feel manageable and worthwhile.

Finally, learners linked meaningful lessons to academic progress and personal growth. Many wanted to pass the BECE, proceed to senior high school and pursue careers that, in their view, required good English. They also valued gaining confidence in speaking, reading more widely and being able to help classmates. Meaningful English learning, therefore, was associated with lessons that were enjoyable, relevant to everyday life and clearly connected to short- and long-term goals.

Discussion

This section discusses the findings in relation to Self-Determination Theory, Engagement Theory and the wider literature on motivation and engagement in language learning. It highlights how motivation and engagement are co-constructed in JHS English classrooms in the Kpando Municipality and how contextual conditions shape what teachers and learners can do.



Motivation as a Contextual and Relational Construct

The findings show that learners' motivation to learn English is influenced by intrinsic interest, external incentives, social relationships and classroom conditions. This pattern is consistent with Self-Determination Theory, which emphasises the importance of autonomy, competence and relatedness for sustained motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2020). Learners' enjoyment of interactive and relevant activities reflects intrinsic motivation linked to competence, while their concerns about examinations, future careers and parental expectations illustrate the continuing role of extrinsic motives (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2021).

Teacher-learner relationships emerged as a key source of relatedness. Where teachers were approachable, explained clearly and acknowledged effort, learners felt more confident to participate and to take risks in speaking English. In contrast, classrooms characterised by frequent shouting and rapid pacing appeared to undermine willingness to contribute. These patterns echo research that highlights the value of autonomy-supportive teaching and positive teacher-learner relationships for maintaining motivation (Mercer & Ryan, 2010; Reeve, 2012).

The learning environment also mattered. Smaller classes and better resources in private schools created conditions that supported more individualised attention and varied activities. However, the presence of motivated learners in some resource-constrained public schools suggests that teacher creativity and sensitivity to context can partly offset material limitations. Motivation, in this sense, is not fixed but is continuously shaped by the interaction between learners, teachers and the physical environment.

Engagement through Interaction, Authenticity and Support

Teachers' strategies to foster engagement align with key aspects of Engagement Theory and recent work on classroom engagement (Kearsley & Shneiderman, 1998; Mercer & Dörnyei, 2020). Interactive activities such as group work, pair discussions and role play provided opportunities for behavioural and emotional engagement. When learners were actively involved in tasks that required them to use English for meaningful purposes, they were more attentive and responsive.

The use of authentic and culturally familiar materials helped to anchor learning in learners' lived experiences. By drawing on local stories, community events and familiar settings, teachers made it easier for learners to see the relevance of English beyond examinations. This supports arguments that authenticity and real-world relevance can enhance engagement and perceived usefulness (Gilmore, 2007). Scaffolding strategies, including modelling, breaking tasks into smaller steps and providing key vocabulary, supported cognitive engagement by making challenging tasks more accessible.

Supportive classroom climates, characterised by warm greetings, encouragement and structured peer collaboration, also contributed to engagement. Learners' preference for discussing tasks with peers before responding in plenary reflects the social nature of engagement and the role of peer support in reducing anxiety (Philp & Duchesne, 2016; Fredricks et al., 2019). At the same time, the risk of some learners dominating group work highlights the need for careful task design and monitoring, especially in large classes.

Strategic code-switching between English and Ewe appears to function as a form of pedagogical support rather than as a barrier to engagement. By using Ewe to clarify instructions and key concepts before moving back into English, teachers helped learners to understand tasks and feel more secure, thereby supporting both behavioural and cognitive engagement in English.



Learners' Views of Meaningful English Learning

Learners' perceptions of meaningful English learning bring together elements of motivation and engagement. They valued lessons that were enjoyable, relevant to everyday communication and clearly linked to academic and future goals. These preferences are consistent with work on the "ideal L2 self" and on the role of positive classroom experiences in sustaining motivation over time (Lamb, 2017; Ushioda, 2016).

The emphasis learners placed on enjoyment suggests that emotional engagement is not a luxury but a precondition for deeper participation. When lessons were experienced as fun yet purposeful, learners were more willing to attend, respond and persist with difficult work. The desire to connect classroom activities to real-life communication indicates that learners want to see how English will function in their lives, not only in examinations.

Taken together, these findings reinforce the idea that motivation and engagement are intertwined and that both are shaped by the interaction of personal goals, classroom practices and broader structural conditions. For teachers and school leaders, this implies that efforts to raise achievement in English must attend not only to curriculum content but also to how lessons are experienced by learners in everyday practice.

Conclusion

This study has examined motivation and engagement in JHS English language classrooms in the Kpando Municipality, focusing on the perspectives of teachers and learners in public and private schools. It has shown that learners' motivation is rooted in a combination of intrinsic interest in English, external incentives linked to examinations and future careers, and the quality of relationships with teachers and peers. Classroom conditions, including class size and resource availability, further shape the extent to which learners feel able to participate and succeed.

Teachers draw on a repertoire of strategies to foster engagement, including interactive teaching methods, culturally relevant materials, scaffolding, supportive classroom climates, structured peer collaboration and strategic code-switching. Learners perceive English lessons as meaningful when they are enjoyable, connected to everyday communication and clearly linked to academic progress and personal aspirations. Across both public and private schools, thoughtful, learner-centred teaching emerged as central to sustaining motivation and engagement, even in the face of contextual constraints.

These findings have several implications for English language pedagogy and for efforts to enhance learner learning. First, teachers in both public and private schools would benefit from continuing professional development that focuses on practical ways of creating autonomy-supportive, engaging classrooms. Workshops and school-based learning communities could be used to share strategies for structuring group work, using authentic texts, employing code-switching judiciously and providing feedback that emphasises progress and effort.

Secondly, school leaders and policy makers should consider how resource allocations can support engagement-oriented teaching. Investments in basic materials such as graded readers, visual aids and simple digital tools can broaden teachers' options, particularly in public schools. Where extensive resources are not immediately available, small steps – such as providing a few shared texts per group or encouraging teachers to develop local materials – can still make a difference.

Thirdly, the study highlights the importance of involving parents and guardians in supporting motivation and engagement. Communication with parents about learners' progress, as well as simple suggestions for encouraging English use at home, could strengthen the alignment between school and



home expectations. When parental recognition and classroom experiences reinforce each other, both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation are likely to be enhanced.

In summary, improving motivation and engagement in JHS English language classrooms requires attention to everyday classroom practice, to the broader conditions in which teachers work and to the voices of learners themselves. By building on the strategies already in use and responding to learners' understandings of meaningful learning, teachers, school leaders and policy makers can help to strengthen both engagement and achievement in English across different basic school contexts.

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