

Motivational Intensity, Desire, and Attitudes: An Analysis of Pakistani Undergraduates' Motivation to Learn English

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Abstract

This study examined the motivation of Pakistani undergraduates in learning English as a Second Language (ESL) through Gardner's Socio-Educational Model (SEM), focusing on three components: motivational intensity, desire to learn, and attitudes toward learning English. A total of 381 undergraduates from three universities participated in the study by completing a 14-item questionnaire. Responses were rated on a five-point Likert scale and analyzed using descriptive statistics. The findings revealed a high overall level of motivation ($M = 3.88$, $SD = 0.96$). Learners demonstrated strong motivational intensity ($M = 3.89$), particularly in their intention to maximize English learning ($M = 4.15$). The desire to learn was the highest-scoring subdomain ($M = 3.92$), with a strong preference for speaking ($M = 4.53$) and writing ($M = 4.44$) over listening ($M = 3.35$) and reading ($M = 3.34$). Learners' attitudes toward English were also positive ($M = 3.83$), especially in terms of enjoyment of English ($M = 4.33$), but lower for classroom materials ($M = 3.30$) and future study ($M = 3.47$). These results suggest that Pakistani undergraduates are highly motivated, especially toward productive skills, yet their motivation may be constrained by weaker attitudes toward resources and long-term engagement. The study contributes to the literature by applying SEM's triadic structure in the Pakistani context and offers pedagogical recommendations for balancing skill development, updating learning materials, and supporting sustainable motivation in ESL learning.

Keywords: Motivation, Motivational Intensity, Desire, Attitudes, English Learning, Pakistan

Introduction

Motivation is widely recognized as a decisive factor in second language acquisition (SLA), shaping learners' effort, persistence, and eventual success (Gardner, 1985; Dörnyei, 2005, 2006). Students who are highly motivated invest greater energy in learning, adopt more effective strategies, and maintain their engagement despite difficulties. In Pakistan, where English is central to higher education and employability, motivation plays a crucial role in determining undergraduates' performance (Khalid, 2016).

Nevertheless, Pakistani learners often face motivational barriers linked to exam-oriented curricula, teacher-centered practices, and resource constraints. Pathan, Ismail, and Fatima (2021) found that demotivation among Pakistani university students was strongly associated with resilience and personality traits, highlighting the need for pedagogical reform. These challenges are not unique to Pakistan but are mirrored in other South Asian contexts; for example, Rahman and Pandian (2018) reported similar concerns in Bangladesh, and Hasnat et al. (2025) found that learners valued English but were dissatisfied with course delivery.

Gardner's Socio-Educational Model (SEM) provides a robust framework for analyzing such issues, conceptualizing motivation through three interrelated components: motivational intensity, desire to learn, and attitudes toward learning (Gardner, 1985, 2001). While newer approaches such as the L2 Motivational Self System (Dörnyei, 2006), regulatory focus theory (Papi & Khajavy, 2021), and grit research (Teimouri, Plonsky, & Tabandeh, 2022) have expanded the field, foundational models such as SEM remain widely recognized as robust and empirically grounded (Hennebry-Leung & Lamb, 2024). Recent work also emphasizes that intensity is not only predictive of achievement (Wang, Zhu, & Zhang, 2022) but can, through repeated effort, develop into habitual learning behavior (Gardner, Rebar, de Wit, & Lally, 2024).

Although motivation has been widely studied globally, Pakistani research has tended to emphasize orientations (Khalid, 2016; Jafri, 2022), attitudes (Jalalzai et al., 2023), or domain-specific constructs such as reading (Khan, Aamir, & Khan, 2024), while professional applications have also been examined (Shahzad & Khan, 2025). However, few studies have systematically applied Gardner's triadic SEM model to undergraduates. This study addresses that gap by examining Pakistani learners' motivational intensity, desire, and attitudes, contributing both empirical evidence and pedagogical insights for ESL teaching in higher education.

Literature Review

Motivation in SLA has been conceptualized in multiple ways, yet Gardner's SEM remains one of the most influential frameworks, defining motivation as a combination of effort, aspiration, and attitudes (Gardner, 1985, 2001). Research consistently shows that motivational intensity, which is the effort learners exert, is strongly predictive of achievement. Wang, Zhu, and Zhang (2022) confirmed this relationship using structural equation modeling, while Gardner et al. (2024) argued that sustained effort can evolve into habit formation, bridging the gap between initial intention and long-term practice.

Desire to learn captures learners' aspiration to achieve competence across specific skills. Studies often report a stronger preference for productive skills such as speaking and writing, as shown in Jordan (Abu-Snoubar & Mukattash, 2021) and China (Ma & Zhao, 2025). Similar patterns are evident in Pakistan, where learners consistently associate communicative competence with academic success and employability (Khalid, 2016; Jafri, 2022).

Attitudes toward learning English play a decisive role in sustaining engagement. Positive attitudes are linked to higher persistence (Dörnyei, 2006), while negative ones can undermine motivation. In Pakistan, Jalalzai et al. (2023) found that positive learning attitudes correlated strongly with academic motivation, but dissatisfaction with materials and pedagogy often

limited learners' enthusiasm. Comparable issues have been documented in Bangladesh (Hasnat et al., 2025; Rahman & Pandian, 2018), where outdated curricula and delivery methods negatively impacted motivation. Emerging research suggests that engaging and technology-enhanced instruction can counteract such challenges (Ramirez-Arellano, 2024).

Pakistani research has expanded in recent years, with contributions examining orientations (Khalid, 2016; Jafri, 2022), demotivation and resilience (Pathan et al., 2021), reading motivation (Khan et al., 2024), and professional domains (Shahzad & Khan, 2025). While these studies affirm the importance of motivation, they seldom integrate intensity, desire, and attitudes in one design. This gap underscores the need for comprehensive analyses grounded in SEM, which remain rare in the Pakistani ESL context despite being well-established globally (Hennebry-Leung & Lamb, 2024).

Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a quantitative survey design to investigate the motivation of Pakistani undergraduates toward learning ESL. The focus was on Gardner's SEM, which conceptualizes motivation through intensity, desire, and attitudes (Gardner, 1985, 2001). The survey design was selected because it allows the systematic collection of data from a large population within a relatively short period, facilitating generalization of results and enabling statistical interpretation.

Research Context and Participants

The study was conducted in three universities in Pakistan where English is a compulsory subject for undergraduates. English functions not only as a medium of instruction in higher education but also as a crucial skill for employability and professional mobility. However, despite its prominence, student motivation in learning English is often affected by curriculum design, teaching practices, and resource limitations (Khalid, 2016; Pathan, Ismail, & Fatima, 2021).

A total of 381 undergraduate students participated in this study. Of these, 244 were male (64%) and 137 female (36%), with ages ranging from 18 to 24 years. The sample included students from both science ($n = 308$) and humanities ($n = 73$) disciplines to capture a range of academic orientations. A purposive sampling strategy was used, ensuring participants were actively engaged in ESL courses at the time of data collection. This approach was deemed appropriate given the focus on learners' current motivational states.

Instrument Development

Motivation was measured using a 14-item questionnaire adapted from Gardner's *Attitude/Motivation Test Battery (AMTB)* (Gardner, 1985, 2001), a widely validated tool in L2 motivation research. Items were selected and slightly adapted to fit the Pakistani undergraduate context, focusing on the three SEM dimensions:

- Motivational Intensity (5 items) – effort and persistence (e.g., *"I plan to learn as much English as possible."*).
- Desire to Learn English (4 items) – skill-specific aspirations (e.g., *"I have a desire to improve my speaking skills."*).

- Attitudes toward Learning English (5 items) – affective and evaluative stance (e.g., “I like learning English.”).

Responses were rated on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). The scale allowed for nuanced measurement of learners’ motivation and facilitated statistical analysis.

Reliability and Validity

Before the main study, the instrument was pilot-tested with a group of 70 students from a comparable university. Feedback from this pilot was used to refine wording for clarity. Cronbach’s alpha was calculated for the pilot sample, yielding values above 0.80 for all three subdomains, indicating good reliability. In the main study, reliability coefficients remained high (Intensity = .91, Desire = .93, Attitudes = .89). Content validity was established by consulting two ESL experts for contextual appropriateness.

Data Collection Procedure

Data were collected using a web-based survey accessible on both desktop and mobile devices. At the start of the survey, participants were provided with a disclaimer explaining the study’s objectives, assuring anonymity and confidentiality, and emphasizing voluntary participation. Informed consent was obtained electronically, and participants were reminded of their right to withdraw at any time.

Data Analysis

Data were coded and analyzed using SPSS. Descriptive statistics, including means and standard deviations, were computed for each subdomain and individual item. To interpret the results, established thresholds (Gardner, 2001; Al-Khasawneh & Al-Omari, 2015) were applied: Low (1.00–2.49), Moderate (2.50–3.49), and High (3.50–5.00). The analysis focused on identifying overall motivational levels as well as variations across subdomains and items. Where relevant, results were compared with findings from previous Pakistani and regional studies to contextualize interpretation.

Findings

Motivation was examined across three subdomains: intensity, desire, and attitude toward English. Overall, learners reported a high level of motivation ($M = 3.88$, $SD = 0.96$) (Table 1). Among the subdomains, desire recorded the highest mean score ($M = 3.92$, $SD = 0.84$), closely followed by intensity ($M = 3.89$, $SD = 1.05$) and attitude ($M = 3.83$, $SD = 0.99$).

Table 1

Motivation Levels by Subdomain

Subdomain	Mean	SD	Interpretation
Desire	3.92	0.84	High
Intensity	3.89	1.05	High
Attitude	3.83	0.99	High

Motivational Intensity

Motivational intensity reflects the effort and focus learners invest in learning English. The overall mean ($M = 3.89$, $SD = 1.05$) indicates a high level of commitment (Table 2).

Table 2

Motivational Intensity Items

Item	Item Description	Mean	SD
1	I plan to learn as much English as possible.	4.15	1.014
2	I pay attention to my task when studying English.	4.01	0.953
3	I try to practice the English I have learned in class.	3.88	1.028
4	I try to do my English assignments immediately.	3.80	1.098
5	I really work hard to learn English.	3.61	1.134

The highest-rated item (*I plan to learn as much English as possible*, $M = 4.15$) reflects learners' long-term commitment to mastering English. High scores for attentiveness in study tasks ($M = 4.01$) and practicing learned material ($M = 3.88$) further confirm sustained effort. By contrast, slightly lower means in completing assignments promptly ($M = 3.80$) and working hard consistently ($M = 3.61$) suggest that daily persistence, while generally positive, leaves some room for improvement.

Desire

Desire obtained the highest subdomain mean ($M = 3.92$, $SD = 0.84$), with learners showing greater motivation for productive skills than for receptive ones (Table 3).

Table 3

Desire Items

Item	Item Description	Mean	SD
1	I have a desire to improve my speaking skills.	4.53	0.756
2	I have a desire to improve my writing skills.	4.44	0.817
3	I have a desire to improve my listening skills.	3.35	0.888
4	I have a desire to improve my reading skills.	3.34	0.909

The strongest scores were recorded for *speaking* ($M = 4.53$) and *writing* ($M = 4.44$), demonstrating learners' clear preference for productive language use. By contrast, their desire to enhance *listening* ($M = 3.35$) and *reading* ($M = 3.34$) was only moderate. These results suggest that while students are highly motivated to improve skills with immediate communicative and academic value, receptive skills receive comparatively less emphasis.

Attitude toward English

Attitudes were also rated as high overall ($M = 3.83$, $SD = 0.99$), indicating generally positive views toward learning English (Table 4).

Table 4

Attitude Toward English Items

Item	Item Description	Mean	SD
1	I like learning English.	4.33	0.870
2	I find that learning English is a wonderful experience.	4.12	0.913
3	I like the activities in my English classroom.	3.94	1.032
4	I look forward to studying more English in the future.	3.47	1.142
5	I like the way learning materials are used in my English class	3.30	0.984

Learners showed strong enjoyment of English (*I like learning English*, $M = 4.33$; *I find that learning English is a wonderful experience*, $M = 4.12$), as well as positive responses to classroom activities ($M = 3.94$). However, their relatively lower ratings for *future study* ($M = 3.47$) and for the *use of learning materials* ($M = 3.30$) suggest areas where instruction could be improved to maintain motivation in the long term.

Across the three subdomains, Pakistani undergraduates displayed high motivation. Learners invested consistent effort, expressed strong desire to improve especially productive skills, and maintained positive attitudes toward English learning. However, moderate responses in certain areas such as effort in daily tasks, motivation for receptive skills, and satisfaction with materials, highlight opportunities for targeted pedagogical interventions.

Discussion

The findings confirm that Pakistani undergraduates demonstrate a generally high level of motivation toward learning English (overall $M = 3.88$). However, the three subdomains reveal important differences that deepen our understanding of learner motivation in this context. Learners reported high motivational intensity, particularly in their aspiration to maximize English learning. This supports Gardner's (1985) conceptualization of intensity as the behavioral core of motivation and aligns with Wang, Zhu, and Zhang's (2022) evidence that intensity significantly predicts achievement. While students expressed strong attentiveness and practice habits, their lower ratings on completing assignments promptly and working hard consistently suggest that day-to-day effort does not always match their long-term goals. This finding resonates with Gardner et al.'s (2024) view that sustained effort must develop into habitual learning behaviors to secure long-term success.

The strongest motivational driver was learners' desire to improve productive skills—especially speaking and writing—while their motivation for reading and listening was moderate. This skill-specific preference mirrors findings in other contexts, where productive skills are prioritized due to their academic and professional utility (Abu-Snoubar & Mukattash, 2021; Ma & Zhao, 2025). Within Pakistan, similar conclusions were drawn by Khalid (2016) and Jafri (2022), who observed that communicative competence is strongly associated with employability. These results highlight the need for curricula that balance productive and receptive skills to ensure comprehensive language competence.

Learners' attitudes toward English learning were positive overall, especially regarding enjoyment and classroom activities, but weaker when it came to course materials and long-term study intentions. This suggests that while students value English, their engagement may be undermined by outdated or uninspiring resources. Similar findings were reported by Jalalzai et al. (2023) in Pakistan and by Hasnat et al. (2025) in Bangladesh, where dissatisfaction with materials reduced motivation. International evidence also supports the idea that technology-enhanced and socially relevant instruction can counter such challenges and sustain learner motivation (Ramirez-Arellano, 2024).

Taken together, the results demonstrate that Pakistani undergraduates are highly motivated, particularly in terms of intensity and productive-skill aspirations, but their attitudes toward materials and future learning reveal vulnerabilities that could undermine sustained motivation. As Hennebry-Leung and Lamb (2024) highlight, while L2 motivation research has

diversified across educational contexts, foundational models such as Gardner's SEM remain highly relevant. The present findings extend this relevance to the Pakistani ESL context.

Conclusion

This study concludes that Pakistani undergraduates display high motivation toward learning English, characterized by strong intensity and skill-specific desire, especially for speaking and writing. Their attitudes, though positive overall, are weakened by dissatisfaction with classroom materials and less enthusiasm for future study. These results affirm the continuing relevance of Gardner's SEM while providing context-specific insights into the motivational profiles of Pakistani learners. Beyond these findings, the study contributes to the literature by (i) applying SEM's triadic framework in an under-researched South Asian context, (ii) demonstrating skill-specific motivational preferences among undergraduates, and (iii) offering evidence-based recommendations for curriculum design and resource development.

Implications for Practice

The results carry several pedagogical implications. First, the strong desire for speaking and writing highlights the need for more communicative and writing-focused activities in the curriculum, such as debates, presentations, and extended writing tasks. Second, the moderate desire for reading and listening suggests that receptive skills require greater emphasis, which can be addressed through authentic texts, audiovisual materials, and integrated skill activities. Third, the weaker attitudes toward learning materials underscore the importance of culturally relevant, updated, and engaging resources that reflect learners' academic and professional needs. Teachers should supplement textbooks with digital tools, collaborative projects, and real-world content. Finally, since motivational intensity is already high, instructional strategies should aim to translate effort into consistent routines, encouraging learners to form sustainable study habits that support long-term language growth.

Limitations

This study is not without limitations. The data were collected through a self-report questionnaire, which may reflect learners' perceptions rather than their actual behaviors. The sample of 381 students from three universities provides useful insights but limits generalizability across Pakistan's diverse higher education system. Additionally, the cross-sectional design captures motivation at one point in time, without accounting for fluctuations across semesters or years of study.

Recommendations for Future Research

Future research should address these limitations by employing longitudinal designs to track how intensity, desire, and attitudes evolve over time. Mixed-methods approaches that combine questionnaires with interviews, focus groups, or classroom observations could provide a richer understanding of how motivation is enacted in practice. Comparative studies across regions, institutions, or disciplines would help identify contextual differences within Pakistan. Finally, intervention-based studies such as integrating new learning materials, technology-enhanced resources, or habit-building strategies, would be valuable in testing how targeted pedagogical reforms affect motivation.

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