

# Essential Factors that Motivate English Language Learning among University Students: A Mixed-Methods Research Study<sup>1,2</sup>

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## Abstract

The study was aimed at determining the essential factors that motivate Ecuadorian university students' English learning. The study adopted an explanatory sequential mixed methods design by means of the administration of online questionnaires to 2077 students and 109 English instructors. The initial quantitative study results were further explained through a qualitative phase, which allowed undergraduate students to provide their own views, thoughts, and experiences about major factors related to types of motivation. Furthermore, eight focus group discussions (FGDs) were conducted, which helped to gain insights to explain the motivational factors determined in the quantitative phase in more detail. Quantitative and qualitative data sets, therefore, were integrated to gain a solid understanding of student motivation in the learning of English as a foreign language within the higher education system in Ecuador. The results showed that students felt motivated to learn English because it was the primary language of international communication that would allow them to accomplish personal, academic, and professional goals. The findings suggest that motivated undergraduate students are highly interested in interacting with people worldwide, furthering their education overseas, and setting themselves apart in their upcoming professional careers thanks to their English knowledge. Their main motivation towards language learning goes beyond the compliance of a graduation requirement only. This study result also provides important insights into a student-centered instruction mainly grounded in key factors that motivate university students' English learning.

## Resumen

El estudio se orientó a determinar los factores esenciales que motivan el aprendizaje de inglés de los estudiantes universitarios ecuatorianos. Los resultados cuantitativos iniciales del estudio fueron explicados a través de una fase cualitativa, que permitió a los estudiantes universitarios aportar sus propios puntos de vista, pensamientos y experiencias acerca de los factores principales relacionados a tipos de motivación. El estudio adoptó un diseño explicativo secuencial de métodos mixtos mediante la administración de cuestionarios online a 2077 estudiantes y 109 profesores de inglés. Además, se llevaron a cabo ocho grupos de discusión (FGDs), que ayudaron a obtener información para explicar con más detalle los factores motivacionales determinados en la fase cuantitativa. Por lo tanto, los conjuntos de datos cuantitativos y cualitativos se integraron con el fin de obtener una comprensión sólida de la motivación de los estudiantes en el aprendizaje de inglés como lengua extranjera dentro del sistema de educación superior en Ecuador. Los resultados muestran que los estudiantes se sienten motivados para aprender inglés porque éste es el principal idioma de comunicación internacional que les permite alcanzar objetivos personales, académicos y profesionales. Los resultados también sugieren que los estudiantes universitarios motivados están muy interesados en interactuar con personas de todo el mundo, ampliar su formación en el extranjero y destacarse en sus carreras profesionales futuras gracias a sus conocimientos de inglés. Ciertamente, su principal motivación hacia el aprendizaje de idiomas va más allá del cumplimiento de un requisito de graduación únicamente. Los resultados de manera integral aportan importantes conocimientos sobre una enseñanza centrada en el estudiante, principalmente basada en los factores claves que motivan el aprendizaje de inglés de los estudiantes universitarios.

## Introduction

It is well-known that English is a required language in work and study throughout the world. People need to have a good command, and even master it, to complete essential academic and professional short- and long-term goals.

At the university level, the requirement to have a good command of English is paramount in non-English speaking countries, as this foreign language is significantly viewed as the language of international

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communication, and it is needed to learn more about study related topics. Therefore, it is imperative and challenging for university students to develop the four major languages. Based on the importance of learning English in today's world, it is imperative to motivate students towards effective language learning so that they can use the target language for academic subjects and, consequently, for their professional lives in the future.

Student motivation in second and foreign language learning is a topic that has been investigated in different educational contexts, because of its facilitative role in student language learning. In fact, over the last ten years several studies regarding factors that influence second and foreign language learning have been conducted at different educational levels, and the findings have indicated that motivation is key for successful language learning.

As stated by Ellis (2008), student motivation is a key influential factor for successful student language learning. This study seeks to add to the existing body of knowledge on the topic of motivation in English language learning to shed light on the main or crucial factors that influence undergraduate students' motivation to learn the English language in the Ecuadorian context at a university level. It is important to note that these results could also be transferred to educational settings outside the country as well.

To gain a thorough and in-depth understanding of the research phenomena, a mixed-methods sequential explanatory study was conducted, which consisted of the administration of online questionnaires to undergraduate students and English as a foreign language (EFL) instructors from several different universities in Ecuador. Then eight focus group discussions (FGDs) were carried out to get detailed explanations and reasons about the main results drawn from the quantitative phase of the study. The research questions this study examined were:

1. What factors influence undergraduate students' motivation towards the learning of EFL in the context of Ecuadorian universities from a point of view of the students and instructors?
2. What are undergraduate students' views and experiences about key factors related to learner motivation in English language learning within the context of Ecuadorian higher education?

### ***Motivation in English learning***

Motivation generally refers to what moves people to act in a certain way. It is related to why people do something, and it influences the effort, as well as the persistence and determination that one has to achieve a desired objective (Dörnyei, 2001; Schunk et al., 2007). Hence, motivation also influences and can even be the key to learning success as in the case of learning a new language (Harmer, 2001; Moskovsky et al., 2013). When a person is motivated, they can overcome obstacles that arise in the learning process (Baker & MacIntyre, 2000; Dörnyei, 2001). As explained by Moskovsky et al. (2013), motivation is more important and more effective than even the capacities and abilities that a person has. As Krashen and Von Sprecken (2002) explain, low motivation increases the affective filter and creates a mental block that prevents knowledge (a language) from being acquired or learned. Without sufficient motivation, students will not have the long-term persistence that learning a language requires. Therefore, it is not surprising that motivation has such a strong impact on language learning. Simply put, it could be argued that learning is more likely to occur when students feel motivated to learn.

### ***Types of motivation***

Some authors divide motivation into two types: integrative and instrumental (Brown, 2000; Lightbown & Spada, 2000; Gardner, 1985). Integrative motivation implies wanting to learn a language to be able to communicate and interact with the community that uses a certain language for personal growth and cultural enrichment or to integrate into the society that speaks that language (Masgoret & Gardner, 2003). According to Hashimoto (2002), students who are interested in the culture that speaks a particular language tend to be more successful in learning a language than those who have a negative or indifferent attitude towards the target culture. Instrumental motivation entails learning a language for functional or external reasons such as passing an exam, obtaining a financial reward, advancing one's career, achieving required grades, earning scholarships, among others (Ghanea et al., 2011).

In general, it can be said that a person learning a language has a combination of both types of motivation (Dörnyei, 1998). But this is not the only classification. Other authors such as Deci and Ryan (1985), for instance, classify motivation as intrinsic and extrinsic. Intrinsic motivation is the one that moves us to learn a language for personal satisfaction because a person enjoys learning it (Mahadi & Jafari, 2012). Students who have this type of motivation tend to be more involved in their learning process, and they manage to be autonomous and solve any type of difficulty that may arise to achieve their objectives (Ushioda,

2008). Extrinsic motivation implies that a person is going to learn a language driven by external factors, for example, to meet social expectations or academic requirements, or motivated by parents, teachers, educational institutions, or driven by social pressure in general (Noels et al., 2001; Ryan & Deci, 2000). However, if the only motivation that students have is extrinsic, once that external objective is achieved, such as passing a class or meeting an academic requirement, they may not see the reason to continue studying and may discontinue their learning.

Although some authors tend to prioritize one type of motivation over the other, it cannot be said that learning occurs thanks to a single type of motivation, but rather is the result of a combination of integrative and instrumental motivation (Gardner, 1985) and intrinsic and extrinsic motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Normally, all types of motivation influence a learner when studying a language, and all of them are usually connected and related in some way. For example, someone could be learning a language because it is an academic requirement (instrumental motivation), but at the same time, they may very much like that language and the culture that speaks this language (integrative motivation) (Brown, 2000). Winn et al. (2006) even state that to reach the maximum potential, a student should have a balance between all these types of motivation.

Furthermore, the type of motivation that a person has is usually dynamic; that is, it can change throughout the learning process depending on the moment or the circumstances (Ryan & Deci, 2000). For example, people may start learning a language just because it is a requirement at their school (extrinsic motivation), but eventually, they come to like the language and continue learning in their spare time, even after fulfilling the requirement they had to accomplish, so now they have an intrinsic motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000). This and other similar types of situations can occur, in which several types of motivation converge, or one type of motivation can be changed for another as time goes by or due to a change of circumstances (Hagler, 2014).

Additionally, studies indicate that teachers and their teaching methods are important factors that motivate student language learning, and they both can greatly influence student motivation (Trong, 2012). If classes are boring, students will feel unmotivated to learn; while, if they are interesting, they will be motivated to study and learn. Dörnyei, (2001) said that through the choice of activities, teaching methodology and class organization, teachers can even help students develop a taste for the language, a positive attitude towards it, and intrinsic motivation to learn, which will help them achieve their learning goals. Similarly, when teachers are enthusiastic, have a passion for the language they teach, have high expectations of their students, genuinely care about their learning, and give students the support they need, the result will be an increase in their level of motivation as well as in their academic achievement.

### ***English as a foreign language within the Ecuadorian educational context***

The incorporation of the teaching of EFL in the Ecuadorian curriculum dates back to 1992. In that year, the government of Ecuador and the British Council agreed to create the Foreign Language Administration of Ecuador, and EFL became part of the curriculum for public secondary schools in 1993 (Soto, 2015). In elementary schools, the panorama was different. EFL was not officially part of the curriculum for this education level until 2016. Before that, it was offered as one of the choices of elective classes, available only in institutions that had the human resources to teach it (Soto et al., 2017). It was even discontinued from the elementary school curriculum from 2014-2015.

In higher education, something similar occurred. In 2013, the Regulations of Academic Regime (Reglamento de Régimen Académico) of Ecuador established the learning of a second language as a compulsory requirement for graduating from undergraduate programs of Ecuadorian universities. Students were expected to demonstrate a B2 proficiency level in a second language, based on the Common European Framework of References for Languages (Consejo de Educación Superior, 2013). Then, in 2014 the requirement of a B2 proficiency level in a second language was changed to a B1 proficiency level (Consejo de Educación Superior, 2013). To obtain the established proficiency requirement, students can study the target language at the language institute of their universities or in private institutions. Students must present a certificate of proficiency that complied with the internal regulations of their institutions.

Before 2013, various undergraduate programs offered English as a foreign language, Technical English, or English for Specific Purposes (ESP) courses in their curriculum. The decision of including English in their programs depended on the importance that curriculum program designers gave to the students' development of competencies in the target language. As a B2 and later a B1 proficiency level in a second language became compulsory for graduating, most undergraduate programs removed the teaching of English from their curriculum.

## Methodology

### Research design

This study, which is part of a two-year inter-university research project, employed a mixed-methods sequential explanatory design. In this type of research design, the initial quantitative data results are explained further with the qualitative data. It is considered sequential because the initial quantitative phase is followed by the qualitative phase" (Creswell, 2014, pp.15-16). Furthermore, as stated by Creswell (2015), "the combination of both forms of data provides a better understanding of a research problem than either quantitative or qualitative data alone" (p. 22). Therefore, following the principles of mixed-methods research, quantitative and qualitative sets of data were gathered. The quantitative data was first gathered through questionnaires, and the obtained quantitative results were then further investigated in detail through focus group discussions (FGDs).

### Participants and instruments

With the aim of determining what motivational factors are the most influential in English learning in Ecuadorian universities, two groups of respondents (students and instructors) were asked to complete online questionnaires consisting of six categories. The applied online questionnaires were constructed through a systematic process that entailed these phases: review of the relevant literature on types of motivation in foreign language learning, creation of categories, elaboration of questions, design of question structure, testing of instruments through validation by experts and piloting, and uploading the final questionnaires to the LimeSurvey platform. The questions in the categories were rated by using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. It should be noted that this article reports the 14-statement category from both questionnaires, which was entitled as follows: *Factors that Motivate English Language Learning at University*.

In the quantitative phase of the study, 2077 undergraduate students voluntarily completed the aforementioned questionnaire; they were enrolled in the language institutes of nine universities located in the Pacific Coast, Amazon, and Highlands regions in Ecuador. Moreover, 109 EFL instructors from twenty-two Ecuadorian universities filled out the corresponding online questionnaire. Out of the 109 respondents, 94 were Ecuadorian instructors and 15 instructors were from the following countries: Venezuela, USA, Great Britain, Cuba, Canada, and Nicaragua. It is important to note that the two groups of respondents were provided with the necessary information to decide whether to complete the questionnaires or not. This means that respondents' informed consent was implied not only by their completion of the questionnaires, but by requesting them to read an introductory text at the beginning of the online tool used for data collection, which contained the aim of the research study, as well as key information stressing that participation was voluntary, ensuring anonymity, and noting that the gathered data would be used only for the purposes established within the present research study. Then they were given the option to move forward if they decided to provide their responses.

Next, a qualitative phase was carried out to explore the quantitative results that needed further explanation. In the qualitative phase, a six-question interview guide was developed based on the identified key, critical quantitative results. The guide was reviewed by three experts before the intended eight FGDs were conducted using *Zoom*. All the group interview sessions were carried out in Spanish, as it is the official language in Ecuador and the medium of instruction at the university level. Before the qualitative data were gathered, students were given a comprehensive informed consent form that had the following sections: introduction, aim of the study, procedures of data collection concerning FGDs, risks and benefits of becoming a participant, anonymity, and confidentiality, right to withdraw, and right to ask questions and report any concern. After the students were informed about all the aforementioned aspects and signed the form, the FGDs started, and they were able to provide their views and thoughts in greater detail about motivation in English learning. It must also be mentioned that before data analysis started, the transcript-returned technique was applied; therefore, the FGD participating students were allowed to read the transcripts, provide comments and make corrections.

### Data analysis

Descriptive statistics were used for analyzing quantitative data with the support of the software R. In this type of data analysis, arithmetic mean, standard deviation, and percentage were used. In addition to this, parametric tests were applied to examine the data. By utilizing p-value, a comparative analysis was conducted in terms of the responses provided by these two participating groups in the quantitative phase: undergraduate students of English and EFL instructors. Regarding the FGD data, a thematic analysis was

employed through the use of the software NVivo 12. All eight transcripts were anonymized by the authors of the article, who first read the raw data to gain a comprehensive understanding. Then the process of codification began by inductively identifying recurring patterns and making use of in-vivo coding. The in-vivo codes were carefully revised and refined and were later classified into sub-themes. Through the applied data analysis process different sub-themes were constructed, and the sub-themes were ultimately grouped into nine broad themes, which are shown in Table 2 below.

## Results

The gathered and analyzed data are presented as follows: two tables that depict both quantitative and qualitative results in a general manner. In this sense, Table 1 shows the fourteen-statement category of the questionnaires administered to both students and instructors, pertaining to the factors that influence students' motivation in English language learning at university. These statements have been organized in order of importance given by both groups of respondents as identified in the results of the quantitative data analysis. Table 2, on the other hand, displays the nine themes and twenty-five sub-themes that emerged from the qualitative data collected through FGDs with Ecuadorian university students.

After the two general tables mentioned above, the top-ranked factors that motivate English learning in the Ecuadorian higher education system are presented in eight individual tables (Table 3 to Table 10). The eight tables contain the data drawn from the questionnaires that were administered to the two groups of participants in a disaggregated manner. Quantitative results are described and further explained with the views, opinions and experiences of the undergraduate students who took part in the FGDs. Excerpts or quotes that capture the general beliefs of FGD participants are included after each of the eight top-ranked motivational factors in conjunction with narrative descriptions of the emerged themes. Underneath each table, selected excerpts and quotes are provided, as they capture the FGD participants' general views and key insights in relation to the reported top factors that influence learner motivation.

It should be pointed out that the analysis of the qualitative data revealed that in the FGD participants' responses there was a high number of repetitions in regard to *motivating English learning effectively before university studies start*. Therefore, in addition to the themes that accompany the eight top-ranked factors highlighted in this article, we also decided to discuss this outstanding theme separately at the end of this section.

Factors that motivate English learning	Survey respondents	N	mean	sd	p
1. Meeting and establishing relationships with people from all over the world.	Students	2077	4.42	0.855	0.857
	Instructors	109	4.40	0.883	
2. Traveling to English-speaking countries for tourism.	Students	2077	4.35	0.906	0.000
	Instructors	109	3.96	0.912	
3. Earning degrees at overseas universities where mastery of this foreign language is required.	Students	2077	4.34	0.896	0.865
	Instructors	109	4.36	0.967	
4. Acquiring and expanding one's knowledge about varied topics.	Students	2077	4.34	0.874	0.440
	Instructors	109	4.28	0.951	
5. Consulting more reading texts related to undergraduate programs and future careers.	Students	2077	4.33	0.891	0.369
	Instructors	109	4.41	0.905	
6. Becoming a more educated person.	Students	2077	4.29	0.895	0.001
	Instructors	109	4.01	0.918	
7. Being able to understand leisure materials in English. such as stories, songs, and movies.	Students	2077	4.28	0.895	0.003
	Instructors	109	4.02	0.962	
8. Developing skills to interact with English native speakers.	Students	2077	4.25	0.911	0.047
	Instructors	109	4.07	0.879	
9. Getting a well-paid job.	Students	2077	4.16	0.942	0.684
	Instructors	109	4.19	0.918	
10. Understanding and appreciating literature and art in English.	Students	2077	4.13	0.936	0.000
	Instructors	109	3.28	1.046	
11. Achieving the required proficiency level to graduate.	Students	2077	4.09	0.987	0.003
	Instructors	109	4.39	0.902	
12. Having advantages at work over those who do not know English.	Students	2077	4.08	1.010	0.012
	Instructors	109	4.33	0.872	
13. Learning about culture and social life from English-speaking communities.	Students	2077	3.90	0.965	0.004
	Instructors	109	3.62	0.989	
14. Wishing to live in English-speaking countries.	Students	2077	3.77	1.077	0.007
	Instructors	109	3.49	0.996	

Table 1: Factors that motivate English language learning within the Ecuadorian higher education context, ranked by order of importance as perceived by students and instructors.

Table 1 above shows fourteen factors that influence students' motivation in English language learning in order of importance given by both students and instructors. Overall, it is important to highlight that the top-rated factor by the 2077 surveyed students across the nine universities in Ecuador was that they felt motivated to learn English because they want to meet and establish relationships with people from all over the world (mean score = 4.42). This factor also had a high level of importance among the 109 surveyed instructors from the 22 Ecuadorian universities (mean score = 4.40). With regard to the surveyed instructors, the most important factor that impacted student motivation towards English language learning was that English facilitated consulting more reading texts related to undergraduate programs and future careers (mean score =4.41). However, this was the fifth most important factor that motivated English learning (mean score = 4.33) among the surveyed students.

Themes	Sub-themes
Status of English as a universal language	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The importance of English as a universal, global language these days</li> <li>• English as an international language in developed countries</li> <li>• English as lingua franca for global communication</li> </ul>
English as a gateway for tourism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Use of English when traveling overseas</li> <li>• Desire to visit new places and make friends</li> <li>• Usage of English knowledge when interacting abroad</li> </ul>
Studying abroad with the aim of earning graduate degrees	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Having a good command of English gives access to graduate programs</li> <li>• Furthering education through English knowledge</li> <li>• Higher degrees and better job opportunities go hand in hand</li> </ul>
Acquisition of new and more knowledge using English	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Expanding one's own knowledge in general through English</li> <li>• Accessing to up-to-date sources of information</li> <li>• Improvement of cognitive and social skills</li> </ul>
Advantages of English for undergraduate programs and future careers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• English knowledge facilitates to better develop homework assignments</li> <li>• English sets students apart in their future professional careers</li> </ul>
Relationship between English and making progress as a human being in general	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Learning English is a mean for frequent personal growth</li> <li>• English facilitates ongoing, future learning</li> </ul>
Motivation in English learning for understanding non-academic materials and enjoying leisure activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Movies and series have an impact on student motivation</li> <li>• Music and even dancing make students feel motivated</li> <li>• Music and movies in general motivate language learning</li> </ul>
Development of communicative skills to interact with English native speakers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Establishing effective communication with native speakers of English</li> <li>• The desire to learn more through interactive communication with English native speakers</li> </ul>
Motivating English learning effectively before university studies start	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Benefits of English learning at an early age</li> <li>• Ongoing endeavors to motivate English learning throughout elementary and high school</li> <li>• Effective instruction is key to motivate English learning from the beginning</li> <li>• Motivating English learning cannot be delayed until university</li> </ul>

Table 2: Themes and sub-themes derived from the FGDs data.

**The eight top factors that motivate English learning at the Ecuadorian university level: Integrating quantitative and qualitative results**

Before discussing each motivational factor, it should be noted that the percentages included in the fourth column of the Tables below show the sum of the second and third columns (Agree and Strongly Agree). These two columns were grouped as they both showed similar levels of agreement in the participants' responses, although to slightly different degrees. The combined percentages of the two levels of agreement in the eight tables can help us to better understand the factors that impact the motivation of university English learners, as perceived by the two groups of respondents.

Theme: Status of English as a universal language

*Ok. To go on student mobility programs. Honestly, one of my biggest dreams is to be able to travel the world. So, I suppose that the English language is essential. Anyone says hi in poor English, but they make themselves understood. My other motivations are to be able to meet people because, to be honest, I like to talk a lot with people. Sometimes I imagine myself in a conversation and that I won't be able to understand something. That is going to be quite funny and a little embarrassing at the same time, but I would really like to have an experience like that. (Focus Group 1- Student 1)*

Participant type	Agree (A)	Strongly agree (SA)	Total of A+SA
Students	738 35.5%	1174 56.5%	1912 92.1%
Instructors	34 31.2%	63 57.8%	97 89.0%

Total N of students + instructors=2.009

Table 3: Meeting and establishing relationships with people from all over the world.

The findings from Table 3 demonstrate that most students and teachers acknowledge the importance of English as a universal language, with 92.1% of students and 89% of instructors agreeing with this statement. These figures underscore a shared belief in the role of English for global communication. On the same line, qualitative results showed an agreed perception among students that motivating English learning at university was key since English is currently the language of global communication. In this sense, FGD participants believed that this language would be used in any non-Spanish speaking country they might visit in the future, and developed countries made use of it daily.

Theme: English as a gateway for tourism

*It would also be perhaps for traveling or, I don't know, for tourism, for traveling to a foreign country. Getting there and knowing, for example, how to communicate about locations; being able to interact with people who speak this language in an easy and fluent way.... (Focus Group 7—Student 5)*

*It would be a key motivating factor, but within those benefits, it would also be sightseeing, getting to know other places, making friends. (Focus group 2—Student 3)*

Participant type	Agree (A)	Strongly agree (SA)	Total of A+SA
Students	745 35.9%	1113 53.6%	1858 89.5%
Instructors	53 48.6%	31 28.4%	84 77.1%

Total N of students + instructors=1942

Table 4: Traveling to English-speaking countries for tourism.

Table 4 reveals that 89.5% of students and 77.1% of teachers rank English proficiency as pivotal for engaging in tourism-related activities. By the same token, qualitative results showed that students wanted to travel overseas for tourism (not only for academic purposes), so they could use their English knowledge for a variety of purposes. While traveling, they wished to be able to interact with people in the target language with ease. They held a shared perception that they wanted to visit places and make friends, which was considered something highly important for them as well.

Theme: Studying abroad with the aim of earning graduate degrees

*English is important especially when studying at the university because it is in that level of education that one becomes aware of what he is going to do in the future. For instance, if one is going to study a master's degree in this or that subject or if one decides to travel to another country to get a master's degree or a PhD. Then I think it is important to motivate students so that they decide to learn or be willing to learn this language, instead of seeing it as a requirement. (Focus group 7—Student 2)*

*And if I graduate in a few years and I want to study a master's degree or any other thing, I will travel to another country where English is spoken. It is necessary to know English. (Focus group 8—Student 4)*

Participant type	Agree (A)	Strongly agree (SA)	Total of A+SA
Students	756 36.4%	1093 52.6%	1849 89.0%
Instructors	28 25.7%	65 59.6%	93 85.3%

Total N of students + instructors=1942

Table 5: Earning degrees at overseas universities where mastery of this foreign language is required.

When considering the aspiration to pursue higher education abroad, 89% of students and 85.3% of teachers expressed agreement, as seen in Table 5. In the same way, the analyzed FGD data showed a general belief among students about the importance of learning English to be able to study abroad and earn graduate degrees. Therefore, in general, FGD participants manifested their intention to leave the country after they graduate from their current universities and further their education. They were well aware that they needed to master the English language, as a good command of this foreign language would facilitate their access to graduate programs in different parts of the world. It was also believed that they might have better future job possibilities by earning degrees overseas where English is spoken. This is a key reason why universities should focus on motivating students to learn English.

Theme: Acquisition of new and more knowledge by using English

*There is this thought that English is not necessarily important, but it is a totally wrong idea. English is fundamental to expand our knowledge and of course, it must be part of students' curricular learning. (Focus group 3—Student 6)*

Participant type	Agree (A)	Strongly agree (SA)	Total of A+SA
Students	825 39.7%	1056 50.8%	1881 90.6%
Instructors	36 33.0%	56 51.4%	92 84.4%

Total N of students + instructors=1973

Table 6: Acquiring and expanding one’s knowledge about varied topics.

Table 6, shows how acquiring and expanding knowledge emerged as a significant motivator with 90.6% of students and 84.4% of teachers agreeing. With regard to the analyzed qualitative data, the FGD results yielded a generally positive perception concerning the role that the English language had when students attempted to learn new things by being able to access different types of enriching, up-to-date sources, such as reading texts in general, articles/papers, and research study reports. Interviewed students pointed out that the great majority of texts came in English, and their quality was the best. By being able to access these types of documents, they could expand their knowledge base, improve their cognitive skills, and learn new, different ways to express themselves.

**Theme: Advantages of English for undergraduate programs and future careers**

*Sooner or later, the majority of the students will be willing to study English. It will be out of necessity rather than by choice since most articles with the best information to carry out our schoolwork or to support some parts of them such as a thesis are usually in English. Then understanding English is something basic for us. (Focus group 5— Student 7)*

Participant type	Agree (A)	Strongly agree (SA)	Total of A+SA
Students	801 38.6%	1064 51.2%	1865 89.8%
Instructors	32 29.4%	65 59.6%	97 89.0%

Total N of students + instructors=1962

Table 7: Consulting more reading texts related to undergraduate programs and future careers.

As shown in Table 7, 89.8% of students and 89% of teachers agree on the critical role of English in accessing resources essential for academic success. In the same vein, the theme *advantages of English for undergraduate programs and future careers* indicated that students from different majors considered that knowing English facilitated their finding information for their assignments. They also mentioned that they could stay updated and engage in research tasks in a more effective manner. Being able to develop research assignments these days by using English knowledge and skills was highlighted as something fundamental by most university students. Moreover, English not only helped them to get the most out of their chosen programs of study, but also to be better prepared for today’s competitive job market after graduation. Among different mentioned advantages, a general perception was identified that relates to the use of English for oral communication with bosses and colleagues in the students’ fields of specialization. Some of them have even already had positive experiences in this sense.

**Theme: Relationship between English and making progress as a human being in general**

*I think it is quite important that you as teachers motivate us to learn English because, as others say, it is something that has practically become basic now. English is something that we must know in order to grow as professionals and not remain in a steady condition. For example, when we find a document, we should be able to read it and not just translate it. Then I think it is very important that teachers motivate us more to learn English. (Focus group 6— Student 8)*

Participant type	Agree (A)	Strongly agree (SA)	Total of A+SA
Students	824 39.7%	1004 48.3%	1828 88.0%
Instructors	46 42.2%	36 33.0%	82 72.2%

Total N of students + instructors=1910

Table 8: Becoming a more educated person.

The idea of becoming a more educated individual, supported by Table 8, resonates strongly with 88% of students and 72% of teachers. In this regard, the FGD data highlighted *the relationship between English*

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and making progress as a human being in general as a motivational factor to learn this language. The majority of the interviewed students believed that, thanks to English, they could work their way up and learn more every day. It was also believed that the English language allowed them to grow as a human being by acquiring new knowledge and helping others. Overall, through English they felt they could advance themselves to higher intellectual levels. The general belief of making progress was emphasized, which relates to the views about keeping on learning and using English for practical purposes, such as utilizing their English knowledge for more authentic reading experiences without relying on translation.

Theme: Motivation in English learning for understanding non-academic materials and enjoying leisure activities

*We can see that the cultural weight of Anglophone countries is quite strong. A person can be motivated, well, generally by professional academic development, but also by music and arts. They are particular interests that exercise some motivation in a person, regardless of if this person is a student or not. (Focus group 4–Student 4)*

Participant type	Agree (A)	Strongly agree (SA)	Total of A+SA
Students	883 42.5%	939 46.7%	1852 89.2%
Instructors	43 39.4%	39 35.8%	82 75.2%

Total N of students + instructors=1934

Table 9: Being able to understand leisure materials in English, such as stories, songs, and movies.

Table 9 highlights the motivational influence of leisure and cultural engagement, with 89.2% of students and 75.2% of teachers recognizing its importance. The theme, which helps to explain this quantitative finding, is entitled as *motivation in English learning for understanding non-academic materials and enjoying leisure activities*, provides reasons and explanations. In this sense, the FGD data showed that undergraduate students were not only interested in learning English to better understand academic reading texts or scientific articles related to their programs of study, but also to be exposed to and learn from movies and music in English. This is related to the interviewed students' general belief that English is a universal language, so they could learn the language through movies and TV series. It was even expressed that they enjoyed watching movies in English as they are in the original language in which movies were released. In addition to movies and music as motivating sources for English learning, it was pointed out that even dance music has an impact on their motivation. All these leisure and entertainment activities help students keep motivated, and this way of motivation encourages them to go on learning English and be connected with English-speaking communities.

Theme: Development of communicative skills to interact with English native speakers

*Contributing to what the previous participant said about generating links with other people and trying to practice the language, it would be much more feasible because we have a native speaker of that language and then it would be better to practice it with that person. (Focus group 1—Student 5)*

Participant type	Agree (A)	Strongly agree (SA)	Total of A+SA
Students	866 41.7%	950 45.7%	1816 87.4%
Instructors	44 40.4%	65 59.6%	83 76.1%

Total N of students + instructors=1899

Table 10: Developing skills to interact with English native speakers.

Finally, Table 10 showcases the emphasis on communication, with 87.4% of students and 76.1% of teachers agreeing on its significance. The FGD data helped to explain these findings specifically through the theme *development of communicative skills to interact with English native speakers*. It appeared that there is a general perception among the interviewed students that the English language helped them to open many different doors beyond the university classrooms. It was mentioned that a good command of English enabled them to meet people from different cultures and interact with other native speakers with ease. In general, students hold the view that it is a good idea to try to generate relationships with native speakers, as this will allow them to practice the target language genuinely. Some of them even stated that it is much better to practice their English with native speakers because it involves more authentic, real language practice.

### **Motivation towards English learning needs to start before university**

In addition to the themes that helped explain further the quantitative results in the above eight individual tables, an additional theme that refers to the importance of *motivating English learning effectively before university studies start* emerged in the data analysis, and it seemed significant. According to the FGDs participants, fostering motivation to learn English needs to start at an early age, as this is the most important language these days for oral and written communication at the international level.

The students interviewed in the FGDs were aware that children could use their curiosity, creativity and interest in learning English. It was also stated that meaningful student-centered instruction was needed so young English learners could better proceed from one educational level to another successfully. For instance, it was explained that appealing instruction based on children's interests needed to be used so, for example, learning activities about songs and chants were crucial. It was even pointed out that certain important aspects developed much easier at an early age, such as pronunciation and cognitive development.

Furthermore, it was evident to almost all the interviewed students that motivation in English learning needed to start in elementary school and be maintained and reinforced through high school. It was also mentioned that learners sometimes lost or had their motivation decrease as they furthered their education, mainly due to poor teaching methodologies and large class sizes. The FGD participants went on to emphasize that there must be a consistent connection between motivating English learning at both elementary school and high school. Thus, English instruction needed to have an important place at these two important educational levels, along with the learning of the traditional school subjects.

Through the identification of this theme, the interviewed students claimed that English learning cannot be seen as something irrelevant, which would entail passing students who hadn't achieved the required proficiency levels established for each educational level. If they acquired a decent level before starting their undergraduate programs, they could even effectively learn more English. Moreover, English taught effectively before their university studies could limit their struggling to achieve the expected proficiency level (B1) at graduation.

They also said that in other countries people started learning English in a meaningful and systematic manner before they become university students and if effective English instruction was not delivered before the beginning of a university career, it might have been difficult for students to feel highly motivated to learn the language. Then trying to motivate students to learn English only at the university level was late, and they would fall behind in their subsequent language learning. The above-mentioned views are reaffirmed in the following quotes by the FGD participants:

*[...] to motivate students from school, right? because there are many schools here in Cuenca that don't teach them English starting from second or third year of elementary school. And, if they teach them English, it's something superficial. I mean, they learn well, but I don't feel that they motivate children to continue studying English and it is something relevant.* (Focus group 6—Student 2)

*Well, regarding children, I think that teaching them English would be important. Why? Because at an early age is when children make more synapses. They learn faster than at our age. Children are like a little sponge. So, if the state fosters English a little more and there is a new curricular reform for English, I think we could raise children that, from an early age, knew that English was important, and not only when we study at the university.* (Focus group 8—Student 1)

*That's when students struggle with English because their level is low. It is even more difficult for us to learn English at this age than to learn it when we are children. So, I think it would be extremely important since we are children, I think motivation should start at that stage.* (Focus group 8—Student 3)

### **Discussion**

Motivation has long been recognized as a cornerstone of education, including the teaching of English. Historically, research has focused on teacher-related factors, such as teaching strategies and materials (Dörnyei, & Ushioda, 2009; D'Souza & Maheshwari, 2010; Filgona et al., 2020; Hassan & Bhat, 2014). While these elements are indeed fundamental, the results of this study highlight other motivational factors that may be overlooked.

Findings underscore that English learning motivation extends beyond the teaching methods and pedagogical tools employed. Students are motivated to learn the language above all, for the tangible benefits English for their personal and professional futures. These include its utility in accessing academic resources, programs and scholarships abroad, and finding a job more easily due to their knowledge of the language (Instrumental Motivation), or even simple things like being able to interact with people from other countries (Integrative Motivation) (Ghanea, Pisheh, & Ghanea, 2011). The results also suggest that students have a

strong extrinsic motivation derived from their present and future needs: the intellectual, educational and/or employment goals that they wish to achieve (Adiele & Nath, 2013; Ryan & Deci, 2000). That is what motivates them to strive to learn the language.

Understanding these motivational drivers is essential to be able to make decisions, not only at the class level, but also at the institutional level to strengthen English instruction at universities. For example, the results of this study led to reflection on the importance of including relevant content in the EFL classes. As Frey and Fisher (2010) explained, students' motivation depends on how significant and relevant the content is to their short- and long-term needs, and on the applicability or usefulness of what they learn. This insight suggests the value of tailoring EFL curricula to include content related to students' fields of study, further emphasizing the importance of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) courses.

The results of this study have created a clearer idea of the perspectives of students, teachers, and experts regarding the factors that most influence the motivation of university students for EFL learning. Hence, it is expected that this study may help all the stakeholders involved to make decisions that contribute to a more effective and motivating EFL teaching and learning process.

However, it is necessary to bring into discussion the situation of undergraduate students who take English courses only as a graduation requirement. In universities there is still a lot of work that needs to be done with those students who, although recognizing the importance of learning the English language, find their main motivation is merely to pass the subject and meet their foreign language graduation requirement. It is true that grades and graduation can be a strong motivating factor in driving students to learn, but this type of motivation does not make students want to continue learning once their undergraduate programs are completed (Koenka et al., 2019). In addition, this can also be a demotivating factor for students who fail to reach the required proficiency levels (Chamberlin et al., 2018), while they are pursuing their degrees. Hence, much remains to be done to determine why many undergraduate students do not give much importance to English, and in turn how this group of students can be motivated to learn this foreign language consistently.

## **Conclusion**

The two-fold purpose of this study was to determine and analyze the key factors that motivated undergraduate students to learn English as a foreign language. Among the findings was that English was still perceived as a gateway for traveling abroad for tourism purposes and that from undergraduates' views, English gives individuals the possibility of making new friends while visiting other countries. Therefore, as it has been widely reported in different studies on motivation in English language learning, this is still among the factors that push individuals to learn this language. However, the undergraduate students who participated in this study not only felt motivated to learn English because they saw it as a universal language allowing them to travel, but also as a language that offered opportunities for academic advancement. In this sense, undergraduate students' motivation to learn English was also influenced by their view that it was as an important component for their academic progress in the undergraduate programs they were enrolled in and for their professional development as a way to advance in their future careers.

In addition, in light of the results of this study, it is important to consider that motivating undergraduate students not only to learn the English language, but also to have a good command of it, is key in today's world. In doing so, it could allow them to have access to more learning opportunities abroad that help them expand their knowledge in different ways. For instance, if students knew English well, it would be less difficult for them to be admitted into programs of study where high levels of proficiency were required. Indeed, this aspect is key as motivation towards English learning is driven by students' willingness to engage in new learning opportunities in other countries that could help them set themselves apart in their future professional careers, as it was revealed in the study results. This is certainly a growing trend due to the study opportunities abroad in the last decade that Ecuadorians have been able to take part in to earn both undergraduate and graduate degrees through state-funded and foreign government scholarships. In consequence, international scholarships for higher education, which promote student mobility, have become one of the most critical reasons that motivate English learning among students in Ecuador.

This study, according to the FGD research participants' views and experiences, also brought to light how important it was to motivate English learning as early as possible, that is, when students are still at elementary school and/or high school. Even though students received English instruction before going to college, the instruction was usually not motivating, practical, or rigorous. In fact, despite having English classes in some cases for six or twelve years in the Ecuadorian educational system, students went to college with a very basic English level. This made it difficult for many to achieve the required language level and

live up to the requirements in college. Although they understood the importance of English for their academic, work, and personal life, they still struggled because of their lack of a foundation in English. This shows the importance of continuing to strengthen the motivation and quality of EFL teaching and learning processes not only at the university level, but from earlier educational levels, since teaching is not independent at each level but education at all levels is closely related and can affect future success.

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