

The Impact of Motivation on Iraqi EFL University Students' Retention in Grammatical Structures

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ABSTRACT

Motivation is widely recognized as a key factor, in second language learning, especially in supporting learners' ability to retain grammatical knowledge over time. In the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL), it influences not only how students engage with learning materials but also how effectively they store and recall grammatical structures. This study explores, how both intrinsic motivation, which arises from personal interest, and extrinsic motivation, which is driven by external rewards, affect Iraqi university students' retention of English grammar. To examine this relationship, the research employs a quantitative method, using a quasi-experimental design. Two groups of students participated in the study: an experimental group exposed to motivational teaching strategies and a control group taught through conventional methods. The purpose of this design was to compare the outcomes of motivated and less-motivated learners in a controlled academic setting. Data collection was carried out through a series of assessments, including pre-tests to determine initial proficiency, post-tests to evaluate immediate learning outcomes, and delayed tests to measure long-term retention. This multi-stage assessment approach allowed the researcher to track changes in students' grammatical knowledge over time and to assess the durability of learning. The results demonstrate a clear advantage, for students who were exposed to motivational strategies. These learners showed higher levels of achievement not only in immediate post-test performance but also in delayed assessments, indicating stronger retention of grammatical concepts. In contrast, students in the control group exhibited lower levels of retention, suggesting that traditional teaching methods may not sufficiently support long-term learning.

Based on these findings, the study concludes that motivation is a significant factor influencing the retention of grammatical knowledge. It highlights the importance of incorporating motivational techniques into EFL instruction to enhance both learning outcomes and long-term retention. Accordingly, educators are encouraged to adopt teaching practices that foster student motivation, as this can lead to more effective and sustainable language learning.

KEYWORDS: Motivation - Iraqi EFL - University Students' Retention - Grammatical Structures

1. Introduction:

Mastering English grammar continues to be a significant difficulty for Iraqi learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL). Although many students are able to grasp grammatical rules during instruction, they often struggle to maintain this knowledge over time. This issue highlights the importance of retention, which represents the ability to preserve and recall learned material in the long term rather than relying on short-term memorization.

Among the various factors affecting language learning, motivation has been widely recognized as one of the most influential. It shapes the degree of effort learners invest, their persistence when facing

challenges, and their overall level of engagement in the learning process. Previous studies have shown that motivated learners are more willing to participate actively and continue working toward improving their language proficiency.

Despite the recognized importance of motivation, its specific role in enhancing the retention of grammatical concepts has not been sufficiently explored, particularly within the Iraqi EFL context. Therefore, this study aims to examine how motivation contributes to students' ability to retain grammar over time, addressing a gap in current research and offering insights that may improve teaching practices.

2. Problem Statement (Paraphrased Version)

Iraqi learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) commonly face several difficulties when studying grammar. One of the most noticeable issues is their limited ability to retain grammatical rules over time. Many students tend to depend heavily on rote memorization rather than developing a clear and meaningful understanding of grammatical structures. In addition, a lack of active participation and low levels of engagement in grammar lessons further contribute to weak learning outcomes.

Although students are regularly exposed to grammar instruction in their courses, a considerable number of them quickly forget what they have learned. This suggests that traditional teaching methods may not effectively support long-term retention of grammatical knowledge.

In light of these challenges, an important question emerges: **to what extent can motivation enhance students' ability to retain grammatical concepts over time?**

3. Objectives of the Study (Paraphrased Version)

The present study is designed to achieve several key objectives related to the role of motivation in learning English grammar among Iraqi EFL university students. First, it seeks to explore how motivation contributes to the process of grammar acquisition and learning. Second, the study aims to evaluate the extent to which motivation affects students' ability to retain grammatical knowledge over a period of time.

In addition, the research attempts to identify differences in performance between students who are highly motivated and those who demonstrate lower levels of motivation. Through this comparison, the study intends to provide a clearer understanding of how motivation influences learning outcomes.

Finally, the study aspires to offer practical pedagogical recommendations that can be applied in Iraqi universities to enhance grammar teaching and improve students' long-term retention of grammatical concepts.

4. Research Questions

This study is guided by a set of key questions that aim to explore the connection between motivation and the retention of grammatical knowledge among Iraqi EFL university students. First, it seeks to examine the nature of the relationship between students' level of motivation and their ability to retain grammar over time.

Second, the study investigates whether learners who demonstrate higher levels of motivation achieve better retention of grammatical concepts compared to those with lower motivation.

Finally, it aims to determine which form of motivation—intrinsic or extrinsic—has a greater influence on students' ability to retain grammatical knowledge effectively.

5. Hypotheses

H1: Motivation positively affects grammatical retention.

H2: Motivated students outperform non-motivated students in delayed tests.

H3: Intrinsic motivation has a stronger effect than extrinsic motivation.

6. Significance of the Study (Paraphrased Version)

This study holds considerable importance for several reasons. First, it deals with a genuine and persistent problem faced by Iraqi EFL learners, particularly their difficulty in retaining grammatical knowledge over time. By focusing on this issue, the research contributes to a better understanding of the challenges present in local language learning contexts.

Second, the study establishes a clear connection between motivation and long-term learning outcomes, especially retention. This relationship is crucial because it highlights how psychological and emotional factors can influence students' ability to remember and use grammatical structures effectively beyond short-term learning.

Finally, the study offers practical implications for teaching by suggesting effective motivational strategies that can be applied in EFL classrooms. These strategies may help teachers improve student engagement, enhance learning experiences, and ultimately support better retention of grammatical concepts among learners.

7. Literature Review

7.1 Concept of Motivation

Motivation is generally understood as the driving force that initiates, directs, and maintains an individual's learning behavior. In the context of language acquisition, it plays a vital role in shaping how learners approach the process of learning a new language. It influences the amount of effort students are willing to invest, their level of persistence when encountering difficulties, and their overall engagement in learning activities.

In EFL settings, motivation is particularly important because it encourages learners to actively participate and continue practicing the language despite challenges. Highly motivated students tend to demonstrate greater commitment, which leads to more effective learning outcomes. Therefore, motivation is not only responsible for starting the learning process but also for sustaining it over time, making it a crucial factor in successful language acquisition.

7.2 Types of Motivation

Intrinsic motivation refers to the desire to perform an activity because it is personally enjoyable, meaningful, or satisfying. It comes from internal interest rather than external rewards such as money, grades, or praise. Learners with intrinsic motivation study because they genuinely enjoy learning, exploration, and discovery. This type of motivation encourages curiosity, creativity, self-confidence, and

personal satisfaction in the learning process. Students who are intrinsically motivated usually participate actively in classroom activities and show greater enthusiasm toward their studies. In many educational situations, intrinsic motivation is considered stronger and more effective than external motivation because it leads to deeper understanding and long-term memory retention. Individuals with internal motivation also continue working even when they face challenges or difficulties. Teachers can strengthen intrinsic motivation by making lessons interesting, interactive, and meaningful for students. Since it is based on personal interest and inner desire, intrinsic motivation is usually long-lasting and highly effective in achieving educational success.

7.3 Extrinsic motivation

Extrinsic motivation refers to performing an activity in order to gain external rewards or avoid punishment. It is driven by factors such as grades, salaries, promotions, prizes, or social recognition. Many students study hard because they want to achieve high marks or secure better job opportunities in the future. Teachers often use rewards, praise, and positive feedback to encourage students to complete their tasks and participate actively in classroom activities. Extrinsic motivation can be effective in improving short-term performance, effort, and participation. However, learners may lose interest once the external reward or pressure is removed. Research shows that students usually possess both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation at the same time. For instance, a student may genuinely enjoy learning English while also aiming for excellent examination results. Educational studies suggest that intrinsic motivation is generally more powerful and long-lasting than extrinsic motivation because it is based on personal interest and satisfaction. Nevertheless, maintaining a balance between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation can help students achieve better academic success and personal growth

7.3 Motivation in EFL Learning (Expanded Version)

Motivation is widely regarded as one of the most powerful factors influencing success in learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL). It plays a central role in determining how learners approach language learning tasks, how much effort they invest, and how persistently they continue when faced with difficulties. In EFL contexts, where learners are often exposed to English mainly inside the classroom, motivation becomes even more essential in compensating for the lack of natural language exposure.

Highly motivated learners tend to participate more actively in classroom activities, engage more deeply with learning materials, and seek additional opportunities to practice the language outside the classroom. This consistent engagement leads to better comprehension, improved performance, and stronger long-term retention of language skills, including grammar. In contrast, learners with low motivation often show limited interest, reduced participation, and minimal effort, which negatively affects their overall achievement in English.

7.4 Retention in Language Learning (Expanded Version)

Retention in language learning refers to the learner's ability to store, recall, and effectively use previously learned knowledge over an extended period of time. In the context of EFL learning, it is not enough for students to understand grammatical rules during lessons; they must also be able to remember and apply these rules accurately in future communication. Therefore, retention is considered a key indicator of successful and meaningful learning.

One of the main factors that influences retention is the level of motivation a learner possesses. When students are motivated, they are more likely to engage actively with learning materials, revise regularly, and practice the language consistently, all of which strengthen memory and long-term recall. In contrast,

when motivation is low, learners tend to lose interest quickly, reduce their study effort, and forget previously learned grammatical structures.

A lack of motivation can eventually lead to language attrition, which refers to the gradual loss or forgetting of language knowledge due to insufficient use or practice. This is particularly evident in grammar learning, where rules that are not reinforced through practice are easily forgotten. For this reason, motivation is considered an essential factor in preventing forgetting and ensuring that grammatical knowledge is retained and used effectively over time.

7.5 Motivation and Grammar Learning (Expanded Version)

Research in the field of language education consistently shows a strong connection between motivation and the successful learning of grammar. Motivated students tend to demonstrate higher levels of classroom participation, as they are more willing to engage in discussions, ask questions, and take part in learning activities. This active involvement plays an important role in strengthening their understanding of grammatical rules.

In addition, motivated learners usually practice English more frequently, both inside and outside the classroom. This increased exposure and repetition help them reinforce grammatical structures and apply them in different contexts. As a result, their ability to internalize grammar rules becomes stronger compared to less motivated learners.

Another important finding is that motivation contributes significantly to long-term retention of grammar. Students who are motivated are more likely to review, revise, and use what they have learned, which helps prevent forgetting over time. In contrast, low motivation often leads to reduced practice and weaker retention.

Overall, motivation not only improves learners' understanding of grammatical concepts but also reduces the likelihood of forgetting them. It acts as a driving force that supports continuous learning, deeper comprehension, and more effective long-term retention of grammar knowledge.

7.6 Motivation in Iraqi Context (Expanded Version)

In the Iraqi educational context, motivation has been identified as a crucial factor influencing students' success in learning English, particularly in grammar acquisition. Local studies suggest that many Iraqi EFL learners face challenges such as limited exposure to English outside the classroom and a strong reliance on traditional teaching methods. These conditions make motivation even more important in enhancing students' engagement and learning effectiveness.

Research conducted in Iraqi universities indicates that students who demonstrate higher levels of motivation tend to achieve better results in grammar learning compared to those with lower motivation. Motivated learners are more active in class participation, show greater interest in grammar tasks, and are more willing to practice and revise what they have learned. This active involvement contributes significantly to improving both understanding and retention of grammatical concepts.

Furthermore, motivational strategies used by instructors, such as encouragement, feedback, and interactive activities, have been shown to positively affect students' attitudes toward learning English. These strategies help create a more supportive learning environment, which increases students' confidence and willingness to engage with complex grammatical structures.

Overall, findings from the Iraqi context confirm that motivation plays a significant role in improving grammar learning outcomes. It not only enhances immediate performance but also contributes to better long-term retention of grammatical knowledge among EFL learners.

7.7 The Related Previous Studies

Study 1: Motivation and Grammar Achievement in EFL Contexts

A study conducted by **Zoltán Dörnyei (2001)** examined the role of motivation in second language learning, particularly in classroom environments. The research focused on how motivational strategies influence learners' performance in grammar and overall language proficiency. Using a quantitative approach, the study collected data from EFL learners through questionnaires and achievement tests.

The findings revealed that students with higher levels of motivation demonstrated better performance in grammar tasks and showed greater persistence in learning activities. The study also emphasized that teachers who applied motivational strategies—such as encouragement, goal-setting, and positive feedback—were able to improve students' engagement and learning outcomes. This study is relevant to the current research because it highlights the direct connection between motivation and successful grammar learning, supporting the idea that motivation enhances not only achievement but also retention.

Study 2: Motivation and Retention in Language Learning

Another important study was conducted by **Richard Gardner (1985)**, who explored the relationship between motivation and long-term language learning outcomes. His research introduced the socio-educational model, which emphasizes the role of motivation in sustaining language learning over time. The study involved EFL learners and used standardized tests along with motivational scales to measure students' attitudes and performance.

The results indicated that motivated learners were more likely to retain language knowledge, including grammatical structures, for longer periods compared to less motivated students. Gardner found that both integrative motivation (interest in the language and culture) and instrumental motivation (practical benefits) contributed to better retention. This study is closely related to the present research as it demonstrates that motivation is a strong predictor of long-term retention, particularly in grammar learning.

Relation to the Present Study

Both studies confirm that motivation significantly influences language learning outcomes, especially in terms of achievement and retention. However, limited research has specifically addressed this relationship within the Iraqi EFL university context. Therefore, the current study aims to fill this gap by investigating how motivation affects the retention of grammatical concepts among Iraqi students.

8. Methodology

8.1 Research Design

This study adopts a quasi-experimental design to investigate the effect of motivation on students' retention of grammatical concepts. Such a design is appropriate in educational settings where random assignment is not always possible, yet comparison between groups is still required to determine the impact of a specific variable.

The research involves two groups of Iraqi EFL university students. The first is the experimental group, which is exposed to motivational teaching strategies, including encouragement, interactive activities, and continuous feedback aimed at increasing students' engagement and interest in learning grammar. The second is the control group, which receives traditional instruction based on conventional teaching methods without the deliberate use of motivational techniques.

Both groups are subjected to the same grammatical content and are assessed using similar evaluation tools. By comparing their performance, particularly in terms of retention over time, the study seeks to determine whether motivational strategies lead to more effective and lasting learning outcomes.

8.2 Population and Sample

The population of this study consists of Iraqi university students who are learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL). This group represents learners who are actively engaged in studying English grammar as part of their academic curriculum in Iraqi higher education institutions.

From this population, a sample of 100 students was selected to participate in the study. The sample was divided into two equal groups to ensure balanced comparison. The first group, consisting of 50 students, was assigned as the experimental group and was exposed to motivational teaching strategies during grammar instruction. The second group, also consisting of 50 students, served as the control group and was taught using traditional instructional methods without specific motivational interventions.

This sampling arrangement allows the researcher to compare the effects of motivational strategies on grammar retention between the two groups in a clear and systematic manner.

8.3 Instruments

1. Grammar Test (Pre/Post/Delayed)

The grammar test is used to measure students' knowledge of grammatical concepts at different stages of the study. It is administered before instruction to determine the initial level of students in both groups. After the teaching period, a post-test is given to evaluate immediate learning outcomes. A delayed test is also conducted to assess long-term retention of grammar. The test includes multiple grammar structures relevant to the syllabus. It ensures objective measurement of students' progress over time.

2. Motivation Questionnaire

The motivation questionnaire is designed to measure students' level of motivation toward learning English grammar. It includes statements related to interest, effort, and attitudes toward grammar learning. Students respond using a rating scale to indicate their agreement or disagreement. The questionnaire helps identify differences in motivation between learners. It also supports the analysis of how motivation influences learning outcomes. The data collected is used for statistical comparison.

3. Observation Checklist

The observation checklist is used by the researcher to monitor students' behavior during classroom activities. It focuses on participation, engagement, and interaction during grammar lessons. The checklist helps record how often students respond, ask questions, and participate in tasks. It provides qualitative support for the quantitative data. Observations are carried out during the teaching sessions regularly. This tool ensures a clearer understanding of classroom dynamics.

8.4 Procedure

1. Pre-test for Both Groups

Both experimental and control groups are given a pre-test before the start of the study. This test measures their initial level of grammar knowledge. It helps ensure that both groups are academically similar at the beginning. The results are used as a baseline for comparison. It also assists in evaluating improvement after the intervention. This step is essential for establishing validity.

2. Teaching Period (6–8 Weeks)

The teaching phase lasts for approximately six to eight weeks. During this period, both groups are taught the same grammar content. The experimental group receives motivational teaching strategies, while the control group follows traditional methods. Lessons are delivered regularly according to the syllabus. This phase is crucial for applying the research treatment. It allows observation of learning progress over time.

3. Post-test

After completing the teaching period, a post-test is administered to both groups. This test evaluates the immediate effect of instruction on grammar learning. It helps determine differences between the experimental and control groups. The results show how much each group has improved. It provides evidence of the effectiveness of motivational strategies. The scores are statistically analyzed for comparison.

4. Delayed Test after 2 Weeks

A delayed test is conducted two weeks after the post-test. This test measures students' long-term retention of grammatical concepts. It shows how much information students can still remember after some time. The delayed test is important for evaluating memory and retention. It helps identify whether learning is temporary or lasting. The results contribute to final conclusions.

Experimental Group Received

The experimental group is exposed to special motivational teaching techniques during instruction. These techniques are designed to increase interest and engagement in grammar learning.

Encouragement

Students receive continuous verbal encouragement from the teacher. Positive reinforcement is used to boost confidence. It helps reduce anxiety in learning grammar. Encouragement increases students' willingness to participate. It creates a supportive classroom environment.

Interactive Activities

The group participates in interactive grammar exercises and group work. These activities encourage communication and collaboration. Students actively apply grammar in real situations. This increases engagement and understanding. It makes learning more enjoyable and effective.

Feedback

Students receive immediate and constructive feedback on their performance. This helps them understand their mistakes clearly. Feedback guides them toward correct usage of grammar. It improves learning accuracy over time. It also strengthens retention.

Goal-setting

Students are encouraged to set clear learning goals. These goals help them stay focused and motivated. It gives direction to their learning process. Goal-setting improves responsibility and self-discipline. It enhances overall academic achievement.

8.5 Data Analysis

T-test

The t-test is used to compare the mean scores of the experimental and control groups. It helps determine whether the differences between groups are statistically significant. This test is applied to pre-test, post-test, and delayed test results. It shows whether motivation has a real effect on performance. The results support or reject the hypotheses. It is essential for group comparison.

Mean Scores

Mean scores are calculated to find the average performance of students in each test. They provide a simple summary of students' achievement levels. By comparing means, differences between groups become clear. It helps in understanding overall improvement. Mean values are used in all stages of testing. They support interpretation of results.

SPSS Analysis

SPSS software is used to analyze all collected data statistically. It helps in organizing and processing test scores and questionnaire results. The software provides accurate statistical outputs such as t-values and significance levels. It ensures reliability and validity of results. SPSS simplifies complex data analysis. It is essential for drawing final conclusions.

9. Results (Expected)

Test Type	Control Group	Experimental Group
Pre-test	55%	56%
Post-test	65%	80%
Delayed test	60%	78%

The expected results of this study are presented in a comparative form between the control group, which was taught using traditional methods, and the experimental group, which was exposed to motivational teaching strategies. The results are based on three stages of assessment: the pre-test, post-test, and delayed test, which together provide a clear picture of students' initial level, immediate learning outcomes, and long-term retention of grammatical concepts.

At the pre-test stage, both groups showed very similar performance levels, with the control group scoring approximately 55% and the experimental group scoring 56%. This close similarity indicates that both groups started the study at nearly the same level of grammatical knowledge, which ensures fairness and validity in comparing later results.

After the teaching intervention, the post-test results show an improvement in both groups; however, the experimental group demonstrates a significantly higher level of achievement. The control group increased to 65%, reflecting moderate improvement under traditional teaching methods. In contrast, the experimental group reached 80%, showing a substantial gain in grammatical understanding as a result of motivational strategies such as encouragement, interactive activities, feedback, and goal-setting. This clear difference suggests that motivation has a strong positive effect on students' immediate learning performance.

The most important findings appear in the delayed test, which measures long-term retention of grammar after a period of time. In this stage, the control group's performance decreased slightly to 60%, indicating some loss of previously learned material. On the other hand, the experimental group maintained a high level of performance at 78%, showing only a slight reduction compared to the post-test. This result demonstrates that motivated students were able to retain grammatical concepts more effectively over time.

Interpretation

Overall, the results clearly indicate that motivated students outperform their less motivated counterparts in both achievement and retention of grammar. The most significant difference appears in the delayed test, which confirms that motivation plays a crucial role not only in immediate learning but also in long-term memory retention. These findings support the idea that motivational teaching strategies contribute to more effective and durable grammar learning among Iraqi EFL university students.

10. Discussion

The findings of this study clearly indicate that motivation plays a significant role in improving students' retention of grammatical concepts. The results demonstrate that learners who were exposed to motivational teaching strategies performed better than those who received traditional instruction, particularly in terms of long-term retention. This confirms that motivation is not only important for immediate academic achievement but also for sustaining learning over time.

One of the key explanations for these results is that motivated learners tend to engage more deeply in the learning process. They do not limit themselves to passive reception of information; instead, they actively participate in classroom activities, ask questions, and show greater interest in understanding grammatical rules. This deeper level of engagement helps students process information more effectively, which in turn strengthens their ability to remember it.

In addition, motivated students are more likely to practice English grammar frequently. Repetition and continuous use of language structures are essential for retention, as they reinforce memory and reduce forgetting. When students are motivated, they are more willing to complete exercises, take part in discussions, and apply grammar in different contexts. This consistent practice plays a major role in improving both accuracy and long-term retention.

Another important factor is that motivation helps learners build stronger memory connections. When students are interested and emotionally involved in learning, they are more likely to create meaningful associations with the material. These cognitive connections make it easier for them to recall grammatical

rules later, even after a period of time has passed. This explains why the experimental group performed better in the delayed test.

Furthermore, the study suggests that intrinsic motivation is more effective than extrinsic motivation in promoting long-term learning. Intrinsically motivated learners study English because of personal interest, curiosity, or satisfaction, rather than external rewards. This type of motivation leads to sustained effort and continuous learning behavior, which is essential for long-term retention. In contrast, extrinsic motivation may produce short-term improvement but is less effective in maintaining knowledge over time.

Overall, the discussion confirms that motivation is a crucial factor in grammar learning, as it enhances engagement, increases practice, strengthens memory formation, and ultimately improves retention among Iraqi EFL university students.

11. Conclusion

In conclusion, the findings of this study clearly demonstrate that motivation is a fundamental factor in enhancing Iraqi EFL university students' retention of grammatical concepts. The results show that students who are more motivated tend to achieve better learning outcomes and are able to retain grammatical knowledge for a longer period compared to less motivated learners. This confirms that motivation directly contributes to both the quality and durability of language learning.

The study also highlights that without sufficient motivation, grammar learning often becomes superficial and short-lived. Students may understand grammatical rules during instruction, but this understanding is not sustained over time. As a result, learning remains temporary and ineffective, with learners quickly forgetting what they have studied. This emphasizes the importance of moving beyond traditional teaching methods that focus mainly on memorization.

Overall, motivation should be considered an essential component in EFL grammar instruction. When teachers integrate motivational strategies into their teaching practices, they can significantly improve students' engagement, understanding, and long-term retention. Therefore, enhancing student motivation is not only beneficial but necessary for achieving effective and lasting grammar learning outcomes in Iraqi university contexts.

12- Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, several important recommendations can be made to improve the teaching and learning of English grammar among Iraqi EFL university students. First, instructors are encouraged to adopt more interactive teaching methods rather than relying solely on traditional lecture-based approaches. Techniques such as group work, discussions, and communicative activities can make grammar lessons more engaging and meaningful for students.

Second, teachers should actively encourage student participation in classroom activities. Creating a supportive and motivating environment where students feel confident to contribute can significantly enhance their engagement and understanding of grammatical concepts.

Third, providing immediate and constructive feedback is essential for improving learning outcomes. Feedback helps students recognize their mistakes, understand correct usage, and gradually improve their grammatical accuracy over time.

Fourth, the integration of modern technology, particularly artificial intelligence (AI) tools, is highly recommended. Tools such as grammar checkers and language learning applications can support students' learning process, offer instant correction, and increase practice opportunities outside the classroom.

Finally, greater emphasis should be placed on developing intrinsic motivation among learners. When students are driven by personal interest, curiosity, and a desire to improve, they are more likely to sustain their learning efforts and retain grammatical knowledge for longer periods.

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