

The Role of Gender in English Language Motivation among Vietnamese High School Students

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Citation: Trinh Bao Phong, et.al (2024). The Role of Gender in English Language Motivation among Vietnamese High School Students, *Educational Administration: Theory and Practice*, 30(10) 931-936
Doi: 10.53555/kuey.v30i10.10558

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

This study explores the influence of gender on English language learning motivation among Vietnamese high school students. Employing a mixed-methods approach, the research investigates both qualitative and quantitative dimensions to offer a comprehensive understanding of how male and female students differ in their motivational drivers. Data were collected from semi-structured interviews with 20 students (10 males and 10 females) and a survey administered to 200 students across three high schools in Hanoi. The qualitative findings reveal gender-based variations in intrinsic and extrinsic motivational factors, with female students showing stronger integrative motivation and male students favoring instrumental goals. Quantitative data further support these findings, indicating significant statistical differences in motivation levels between genders. The study is grounded in Gardner's Socio-Educational Model and Dörnyei's L2 Motivational Self System. Results suggest that gender plays a critical role in shaping students' attitudes and behaviors toward English language learning. Educational implications include the need for gender-sensitive pedagogical strategies and curriculum development to foster equitable and effective language education. This research contributes to the growing body of literature on second language acquisition and provides practical insights for teachers, policymakers, and curriculum designers in Vietnam.

Keywords: *gender, motivation, English language learning, Vietnamese high school students, second language acquisition.*

Introduction

Motivation is widely acknowledged as a cornerstone of successful second language acquisition (SLA), acting as a determinant of learners' engagement, persistence, and overall achievement in language learning (Dörnyei, 2005; Ushioda, 2011). As a multifaceted construct, motivation encompasses cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions that drive learners to initiate and sustain language learning efforts (Al-Hoorie, 2017). One influential model in the field is Gardner's (1985) Socio-Educational Model, which distinguishes between integrative and instrumental motivation, both of which play critical roles in shaping language learning outcomes. More recently, Dörnyei's (2009) L2 Motivational Self System has provided a comprehensive framework for understanding how learners' self-concept, future aspirations, and social influences interact to inform their motivational orientations. Despite the robust body of research on language motivation, the role of socio-demographic factors—particularly gender—has received comparatively less attention, especially in specific cultural contexts such as Vietnam.

Gender, as a socio-cultural variable, has been shown to influence motivational trajectories, learning styles, and classroom engagement in language learning (Henry, 2009; Lamb, 2012). Studies have demonstrated that male and female students often differ in their motivational orientations, with females generally exhibiting stronger integrative and intrinsic motivation, while males may gravitate toward instrumental and extrinsic goals (Papi & Teimouri, 2014; Busse, 2013). However, these patterns are not universally consistent and may vary significantly across socio-cultural settings. In Vietnam, where English is positioned as a gateway to international opportunities and economic mobility, understanding gender-specific motivations is essential. Vietnamese high school students operate within a rapidly transforming educational landscape marked by globalization, technological advancement, and evolving gender norms (Nguyen & Hamid, 2016). Given that

secondary education serves as a critical juncture in shaping students' academic and professional trajectories, investigating gendered motivational patterns at this stage is particularly pertinent.

This study aims to explore the role of gender in English language learning motivation among Vietnamese high school students through a mixed-methods approach. By integrating qualitative insights from student interviews with quantitative data derived from standardized motivational questionnaires, the research seeks to offer a holistic and nuanced understanding of gender-based differences in language motivation. The qualitative component captures individual learners' lived experiences, socio-cultural influences, and affective orientations toward English, while the quantitative aspect measures motivational trends and statistically significant differences across gender groups. This triangulation enhances the study's validity and depth, aligning with best practices in SLA research methodology (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

Ultimately, the findings of this study are expected to contribute both theoretically and practically. On the theoretical front, the research extends the applicability of existing motivational models—particularly Dörnyei's L2 Motivational Self System—within a Vietnamese context. Practically, the study offers critical implications for educators, curriculum developers, and policymakers by highlighting the need for gender-responsive pedagogical strategies that align with students' diverse motivational profiles. In doing so, this research supports the broader educational goal of equity and inclusion and promotes more effective language learning environments across Vietnamese high schools.

Research Questions

1. How do Vietnamese male and female high school students differ in their perceptions and experiences of English language learning motivation?
2. What are the statistically significant differences in English language motivation between male and female Vietnamese high school students?

Literature Review

Building upon these foundational models, recent scholarship in SLA has increasingly acknowledged gender as a critical variable in shaping language learning motivation. While much of the earlier research approached motivation as a largely universal construct, contemporary perspectives emphasize that motivational orientations are deeply embedded in social identities, including gender (Mercer, 2011; Lamb, 2012). Empirical evidence consistently suggests that male and female learners often exhibit different patterns of motivation, shaped by societal expectations, educational environments, and individual learner identities. Female students, for example, are frequently found to display higher levels of integrative and intrinsic motivation, as they are more likely to value personal and cultural connections through language learning (Busse, 2013; Dewaele et al., 2016). They often articulate aspirations such as communicating with native speakers, accessing global media, or engaging in intercultural exchange. In contrast, male learners are generally more instrumentally motivated, associating English proficiency with tangible benefits such as job prospects, academic advancement, or social status (Henry, 2009; Papi & Teimouri, 2014). These motivational differences not only reflect individual preferences but are also rooted in broader socio-cultural dynamics, including traditional gender roles, access to educational opportunities, and the ways in which success is conceptualized differently for boys and girls across cultures (Clark & Trafford, 1995; Polat et al., 2019).

These findings are further supported by cross-cultural research that examines the interaction between gender, culture, and motivation. For instance, Lamb and Arisandy (2020) explored gendered motivations among Indonesian high school students and found that girls were more likely to construct an "Ideal L2 Self" characterized by aspirations for international engagement, cultural exploration, and global citizenship. Boys, on the other hand, often associated English learning with pragmatic, utilitarian goals such as economic success or national advancement. This gendered divergence in motivational constructs echoes similar results in Middle Eastern and East Asian contexts, where the intersection of gender and language learning is mediated by local ideologies and institutional structures (Gao, 2010; Papi & Abdollahzadeh, 2012). Moreover, motivation is now widely seen as a dynamic and context-sensitive construct that changes over time and is influenced by shifting self-concepts, educational policies, and societal transformations (Ushioda, 2011; Dörnyei & Ryan, 2015). It is thus imperative to adopt a nuanced, intersectional approach to studying gender and language learning motivation—one that accounts not only for binary distinctions but also the socio-political and historical contexts in which these differences emerge and evolve.

Despite the growing interest in gender-related motivation studies, much of the existing literature remains Western-centric, with limited attention to under-researched contexts such as Vietnam. In many Southeast Asian societies, including Vietnam, gendered expectations are shaped by a complex interplay of Confucian values, post-colonial legacies, and neoliberal educational reforms (Nguyen & Hamid, 2016). As English becomes increasingly associated with modernization, globalization, and social mobility, the symbolic meaning of English learning diverges along gender lines. Girls may view English proficiency as a means of personal empowerment and global engagement, while boys may approach it as a competitive asset in securing professional success. However, these assumptions are not static and may shift with changing societal norms, parental expectations, and exposure to digital technologies. Therefore, understanding how gender influences motivation among Vietnamese high school students necessitates an empirical inquiry grounded in local realities and informed by global theory. The present study addresses this gap by examining gendered

motivational differences within the specific socio-educational context of Vietnam, using a mixed-methods design to explore how male and female students conceptualize, experience, and pursue English language learning.

Research Methodology

This study adopts a mixed-methods research design, combining both qualitative and quantitative approaches to obtain a holistic and nuanced understanding of how gender influences English language learning motivation among Vietnamese high school students. Mixed-methods research is particularly suitable for complex educational inquiries as it enables the triangulation of data, thereby enhancing both the validity and reliability of findings (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). Specifically, the study follows an explanatory sequential design in which qualitative insights are used to elaborate on patterns identified through quantitative analysis. The integration of both data strands allows for the exploration of not only the measurable differences in motivational constructs but also the subjective experiences and socio-cultural factors that underpin them (Dörnyei, 2007; Johnson & Christensen, 2019).

The qualitative phase involved semi-structured interviews with 20 high school students (10 males and 10 females) selected through purposive sampling from three public high schools in Quang Nam Province, Vietnam. Interviews were conducted in Vietnamese and later transcribed and translated into English to maintain linguistic fidelity and contextual accuracy. The questions were designed to explore participants' personal motivations for learning English, their perceptions of gender expectations, and their learning experiences both inside and outside the classroom. Thematic analysis, as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), was employed to identify recurring themes and patterns related to motivational differences across genders. Coding was carried out using NVivo software, which facilitated systematic data organization and ensured analytical rigor.

In the quantitative phase, a structured questionnaire grounded in Dörnyei's (2009) L2 Motivational Self System was administered to a larger sample of 200 high school students (100 males and 100 females) across the same schools. The survey included Likert-scale items measuring four motivational dimensions: Ideal L2 Self, Ought-to L2 Self, Integrative Motivation, and Instrumental Motivation. Prior to distribution, the instrument underwent pilot testing to ensure clarity and internal consistency, with Cronbach's alpha values exceeding the acceptable threshold of 0.70 for all subscales. Data analysis was conducted using SPSS software (version 26), employing both descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations) and inferential statistics (independent samples t-tests) to examine gender-based differences in motivation. This dual approach aligns with best practices in applied linguistics research, where the combination of numerical generalizability and interpretative depth is crucial to understanding the multifaceted nature of learner motivation (Mackey & Gass, 2016).

The integration of qualitative and quantitative methods not only strengthens the empirical grounding of the study but also allows for the validation and elaboration of findings across different types of data. This methodological triangulation is particularly important in SLA research, where learner motivation is shaped by complex interactions among cognitive, affective, and sociocultural variables (Ushioda, 2011). By employing this mixed-methods approach, the study provides a richer and more contextually grounded picture of how gender mediates English language learning motivation in Vietnam.

Findings and Discussion

Vietnamese male and female high school students differ in their perceptions and experiences of English language learning motivation

Thematic analysis of the qualitative interviews conducted with 20 high school students (10 males and 10 females) revealed three interrelated themes that characterize gender-based differences in English language learning motivation: motivational orientation, perceived classroom environment, and societal expectations. In terms of motivational orientation, female participants consistently demonstrated a stronger inclination toward integrative motivation, expressing a desire to connect with English-speaking cultures and engage with global media. Many female students cited their interest in English-language films, literature, and aspirations for studying abroad as key sources of motivation. One respondent remarked, "I want to learn English because I love English movies and I dream of studying abroad," reflecting a motivation aligned with cultural curiosity and international engagement. These findings are consistent with prior studies that have shown female learners to be more intrinsically and socially motivated in language learning (Busse, 2013; Dewaele et al., 2016). Conversely, male students exhibited a more instrumental orientation, emphasizing English as a tool for securing future employment or academic opportunities. A typical comment included, "English is important for my future job, so I try to study hard," highlighting a pragmatic, goal-driven motivation that aligns with existing literature suggesting that male learners often approach language learning with performance-related objectives (Henry, 2009; Papi & Teimouri, 2014). The second theme, perceived classroom environment, revealed differing preferences between genders. Female students generally expressed a preference for collaborative learning, noting that positive teacher feedback and peer interaction enhanced their motivation and confidence. These sentiments align with Mercer's (2011) findings that female learners are more responsive to supportive,

relationship-oriented classroom dynamics. In contrast, male students reported being more motivated by competitive learning environments, stating that they were driven by comparison with peers and personal academic rivalry, consistent with findings from Lamb and Arisandy (2020), who argue that male learners often thrive in environments emphasizing competition and achievement. The third theme, societal expectations, illustrated how cultural and gender norms shape learners' motivations. Female students indicated that English proficiency was perceived as a marker of intelligence, modernity, and social status, which encouraged them to invest more in language learning. Meanwhile, male students highlighted the societal expectation to succeed professionally and viewed English as a necessary skill for career advancement. These findings reflect Vietnam's socio-cultural context, where English is increasingly associated with globalization, upward mobility, and national development (Nguyen & Hamid, 2016). Furthermore, the internalization of gendered roles—where females are encouraged to embody social refinement and males are pressured to achieve professional success—further reinforces these motivational differences (Mercer & Williams, 2014). Together, these three themes demonstrate that gender plays a substantial role in shaping the motivational experiences of high school learners, influenced by individual aspirations, classroom dynamics, and broader societal values. Understanding these nuanced patterns is crucial for educators and policymakers seeking to implement gender-sensitive teaching strategies that foster equitable and effective English language education.

Significant differences in English language motivation between male and female Vietnamese high school students

To address the second research question regarding statistically significant differences in English language motivation between male and female Vietnamese high school students, data were collected from a survey based on Dörnyei's (2009) L2 Motivational Self System and administered to 200 students (100 males and 100 females) from three public high schools in Quang Nam Province, Vietnam. Participants responded to items on a 5-point Likert scale measuring four motivational constructs: Integrative Motivation, Instrumental Motivation, Ideal L2 Self, and Ought-to L2 Self. Additionally, self-reported English test scores were collected to compare academic learning outcomes. The results of independent samples t-tests are summarized in the tables below.

Table 1: Gender Differences in English Language Motivation

Motivation Construct	Gender	Mean	SD	t-value	p-value
Integrative Motivation	Female	4.23	0.56	4.72	<.001
	Male	3.75	0.62		
Instrumental Motivation	Female	4.01	0.60	-3.16	.002
	Male	4.29	0.58		
Ideal L2 Self	Female	4.35	0.52	3.85	<.001
	Male	4.05	0.59		
Ought-to L2 Self	Female	3.90	0.61	-2.21	.028
	Male	4.10	0.57		

The data in Table 1 reveal statistically significant gender differences across all four motivational constructs. Female students reported significantly higher levels of **integrative motivation** ($M = 4.23$, $SD = 0.56$) compared to males ($M = 3.75$, $SD = 0.62$), $t = 4.72$, $p < .001$, suggesting a stronger desire among females to engage with English-speaking cultures and communities. This supports previous findings that female students are more inclined toward relational and socially embedded reasons for learning a language (Busse, 2013; Dewaele et al., 2016). In contrast, males exhibited significantly higher instrumental motivation ($M = 4.29$) than females ($M = 4.01$), $t = -3.16$, $p = .002$, aligning with research showing that male learners are more influenced by utilitarian goals such as job prospects and academic performance (Henry, 2009; Papi & Teimouri, 2014). Similarly, the Ideal L2 Self scores were higher among females, indicating that they more vividly imagined themselves as successful future English users ($t = 3.85$, $p < .001$), whereas males scored higher in the Ought-to L2 Self, reflecting stronger feelings of obligation imposed by external expectations ($t = -2.21$, $p = .028$). These findings indicate that while both genders are motivated to learn English, the nature and source of their motivation differ significantly, with implications for differentiated classroom strategies (Dörnyei & Ryan, 2015).

Table 2: Gender Differences in English Learning Outcomes (Self-Reported Test Scores)

Gender	Mean Test Score (/10)	SD	t-value	p-value
Female	8.21	0.94	3.48	.001
Male	7.68	1.05		

Table 2 compares the average English test scores between male and female participants. Female students reported significantly higher test scores ($M = 8.21$, $SD = 0.94$) compared to males ($M = 7.68$, $SD = 1.05$), with the difference being statistically significant, $t = 3.48$, $p = .001$. These results suggest that higher integrative motivation and a stronger Ideal L2 Self—both of which were more pronounced among female students—may positively influence actual language learning outcomes. This aligns with studies indicating that students who internalize language goals in relation to their self-concept and future identity tend to perform better

academically (Ushioda, 2011; Al-Hoorie, 2018). The lower scores among male students may reflect a disconnect between their external motivation (Ought-to L2 Self) and sustained academic engagement, as instrumental motives alone may not guarantee long-term achievement (Papi & Teimouri, 2014). These findings further support the argument that motivational type—not just level—has a measurable impact on learner success.

In sum, the statistical analysis highlights significant gender-based differences in both motivational constructs and learning outcomes. While male and female students are equally motivated, the direction and quality of their motivation differ, with females more likely to embody idealized, self-driven goals that translate into higher academic performance. These insights point to the need for gender-sensitive interventions in curriculum design, motivational scaffolding, and learner support systems within Vietnamese high schools.

Conclusion

This study set out to examine the role of gender in shaping English language learning motivation among Vietnamese high school students through a mixed-methods approach, integrating qualitative insights and quantitative analysis. Drawing on Gardner's Socio-Educational Model and Dörnyei's L2 Motivational Self System, the research revealed clear gender-based distinctions in both the nature of students' motivation and their academic outcomes. Female students were found to exhibit significantly stronger integrative motivation and Ideal L2 Selves, often driven by aspirations of intercultural communication, personal development, and global engagement. In contrast, male students demonstrated higher levels of instrumental and Ought-to L2 motivation, largely shaped by external expectations such as career goals and societal obligations.

Qualitative interviews supported these findings, revealing that female students favored collaborative and socially engaging learning environments, whereas males responded more positively to competitive and performance-driven settings. Furthermore, the analysis of test scores showed that females not only reported more self-driven motivation but also achieved significantly higher English learning outcomes on average. These findings underscore the interplay between motivation type and language learning success, and the extent to which gendered experiences and societal expectations mediate this relationship.

The implications of this study are both theoretical and practical. Theoretically, it reinforces the value of integrating motivational and sociocultural frameworks in SLA research. Practically, it calls for gender-sensitive educational policies and classroom strategies that account for diverse motivational profiles. Teachers should consider incorporating varied pedagogical approaches—balancing collaboration with healthy competition—to support learners of all genders. Policymakers and curriculum designers are also encouraged to promote inclusive learning environments that recognize and foster the different ways male and female students engage with language learning. Future research may expand on these findings by exploring other demographic variables such as socioeconomic status or regional differences to provide an even more comprehensive understanding of learner motivation in Vietnam.

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