

AN IN-DEPTH ANALYSIS OF EFL STUDENTS' MOTIVATION IN WRITING AN UNDERGRADUATE THESIS: A SELF-DETERMINATION THEORY

Fathia Afray Vita Oktavia¹, Sonny Elfiyanto², Eko Suhartoyo³

^{1,2,3} English Education Department, Universitas Islam Malang, Indonesia

Email: ¹ 22101073022@unisma.ac.id,

Abstract

This study explores the motivation of EFL undergraduate students in writing their undergraduate thesis using the Self-Determination Theory (SDT) as the theoretical framework. Employing an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design, the research involved 51 students from the English Education Department at Universitas Islam Malang through questionnaire distribution and follow-up interviews with two selected participants. The findings revealed seven dimensions of motivation: intrinsic (to know, to accomplish, stimulation), extrinsic (external regulation, introjected regulation, identified regulation), and amotivation. Among them, intrinsic motivation emerged as the strongest, indicating students' deep interest in learning and completing their undergraduate thesis. The study also identified significant challenges such as procrastination, difficulty in selecting a topic, and unconstructive communication with supervisors. To overcome these, students applied strategies including personal time management, resource organization, and emotional support from family. This research contributes to a deeper understanding of the role of SDT in academic writing motivation and offers practical insights for both educators and students.

Keywords: Motivation, undergraduate thesis writing, Self-Determination Theory (SDT), EFL students

INTRODUCTION

Writing an undergraduate thesis represents one of the most demanding academic undertakings for students, particularly for those in an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) setting. It demands a high level of discipline, motivation, and resilience to manage both cognitive and emotional complexities. In Indonesia, undergraduate thesis writing remains a significant challenge for many EFL students, often leading to delays, frustration, or even abandonment of the process. According to Elfiyanto (2020), writing plays a critical role not only in transmitting but also in constructing knowledge, making it a powerful tool for intellectual exploration. This underscores that undergraduate thesis writing is not merely a technical requirement but also a reflective academic practice. Furthermore, Kurniasih et al. (2020) emphasized that academic writing demands precision, clarity, and the ability to self-express ideas comprehensively, which EFL students often find difficult due to language limitations. These struggles are exacerbated in EFL contexts where students must write in a language that is not used in their everyday lives. Additionally, Umamah and Cahyono (2020), found that many Indonesian EFL students face writing anxiety, lack of vocabulary, and ineffective strategy use, all of which hinder progress and motivation in writing tasks. These challenges, when unaddressed, may lead students toward procrastination or even amotivation.

Previous studies have mostly focused on external or behavioral factors related to undergraduate thesis writing (Diasti & Mbato (2020); Mbato & Cendra (2019)). However, there has been limited research examining the motivational constructs underlying students' persistence using comprehensive theories such as Self-Determination Theory (SDT). SDT, proposed by Ryan and Deci (2000), categorizes human motivation into three major types: intrinsic motivation, extrinsic motivation, and amotivation. Intrinsic motivation refers to doing something for its inherent satisfaction; extrinsic motivation involves external rewards or pressures, and amotivation refers to a lack of intention to act. This study aims to fill the gap by applying SDT to investigate the underlying motivational factors that drive or hinder EFL students' undergraduate thesis-writing processes. Moreover, the study explores the real-life strategies students use to cope with the psychological and academic demands of writing their undergraduate thesis.

METHOD

Research Design

This study used an explanatory sequential mixed-method design. It began with the quantitative phase, which involved distributing motivation questionnaires based on SDT to 51 English Education students from the 2021 cohort. The qualitative phase followed, in which two participants were selected for semi-structured interviews to provide deeper insight into the quantitative findings.

Participants

Fifty-one students participated in the quantitative phase. They were selected using purposive sampling from the 2021 cohort, who had entered or completed their undergraduate thesis writing process. For the qualitative phase, two students with high and moderate motivation levels were chosen using maximum variation sampling. This provided a broader range of experiences.

Data Sources

The quantitative instrument was a motivation questionnaire adapted from Yesilyurt (2008), containing 33 Likert-scale items and 2 open-ended questions that measure seven constructs: Amotivation; external regulation; introjected regulation; identified regulation; intrinsic motivation for knowledge; intrinsic motivation for accomplishment; intrinsic motivation to experience stimulation. The qualitative instrument was a self-constructed semi-structured interview guideline designed to explore students' challenges and strategies in writing their undergraduate thesis.

Data Collections

Data were collected in two stages. First, a questionnaire consisting of 33 items based on Self-Determination Theory was distributed to 51 EFL undergraduate students through Google Forms. Second, semi-structured interviews were conducted with two selected participants who had completed their undergraduate thesis defense. The interviews were held online and offline, recorded with consent, and later transcribed. To ensure data accuracy, the researcher conducted member checking by allowing participants to verify the transcripts.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics through SPSS to determine the levels of intrinsic motivation, extrinsic motivation, and amotivation among students. Meanwhile, qualitative data from the interviews were analyzed using Braun and Clarke (2006) thematic analysis, which involved a six-phase process: familiarizing with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report.

FINDINGS

Students' Motivation in Writing an Undergraduate Thesis

The questionnaire results showed that students were primarily motivated by intrinsic factors. The highest mean score was found in the dimension of to gain knowledge ($M = 3.88$), followed by to accomplish ($M = 3.75$), and stimulation ($M = 3.64$). This suggests that most students were internally driven by curiosity, a desire to master their topic, and a sense of satisfaction in completing their undergraduate thesis. Extrinsic motivation was present at a moderate level. Identified regulation ($M = 3.62$) indicates that students understood the personal relevance of completing their undergraduate thesis, such as fulfilling graduation requirements or preparing for future careers. Introjected regulation ($M = 3.38$) and external regulation ($M = 3.20$) showed that some were also influenced by social pressure, self-worth, or expectations from others. The lowest average was found in amotivation ($M = 2.40$), implying that most students had a clear sense of purpose and did not feel disconnected from the process. However, minor fluctuations in motivation may still occur during the more difficult stages of writing.

TABLE 1. Interpretation of Motivation

Types of Motivation	Mean	Std. Deviation	Interpretation
Intrinsic Motivation for Knowledge	3.88	0.82	High degree of motivation
Intrinsic Motivation for Accomplishment	3.75	0.80	High degree of motivation
External Regulation	3.58	0.66	Moderate degree of motivation
Intrinsic Motivation to Experiences Stimulation	3.54	0.80	Moderate degree of motivation
Introjected Regulation	3.53	0.73	Moderate degree of motivation
Identified Regulation	3.53	0.71	Moderate degree of motivation
Amotivation	2.40	0.80	Moderate degree of motivation

Motivational-Related Challenges Faced During the Undergraduate Thesis Process

Interview findings revealed several common and recurring challenges experienced by students throughout the undergraduate thesis writing process. These challenges were categorized into internal, cognitive, and relational difficulties. Internally, students often struggled with procrastination, low energy, and a lack of consistent motivation. Despite having plans and schedules, many found it hard to maintain discipline over time.

"The biggest and most important challenge in working on this undergraduate thesis is laziness, because it is challenging to fight laziness."

Cognitively, students experienced difficulty in choosing suitable research topics and finding relevant theories or previous studies. These academic demands made the early stages of undergraduate thesis writing particularly frustrating and confusing. This lack of clarity sometimes led students to question the value of their topic or their ability to complete the task, contributing to temporary drops in motivation.

"The first challenge I faced when writing an undergraduate thesis was determining the undergraduate thesis title. Then, when compiling the undergraduate thesis, I had difficulty finding theories in my undergraduate thesis, and then looking for sources that supported my statement, too. It was challenging; I had difficulty finding that one in previous research."

Relationally, students reported challenges in their interactions with undergraduate thesis supervisors. These included receiving vague, delayed, or overly harsh feedback that sometimes felt discouraging or personal. Negative experiences during supervision sessions often created anxiety, emotional distress, and even a desire to stop working on their undergraduate thesis.

“Meanwhile, what made me down while working on the undergraduate thesis was the supervisor, not blaming, but the fact. For example, when I was in the last guidance, I received criticism, and when I delivered the criticism, my lecturer was judgmental.”

These challenges had a significant emotional impact and were commonly mentioned as demotivating moments during the undergraduate thesis process. Overall, these internal, academic, and relational challenges contributed to delays in progress and affected students' confidence and persistence.

Motivational Strategies to Overcome those Challenges

Despite the various internal, cognitive, and relational challenges, students managed to develop personal strategies to help them stay focused, manage their emotions, and maintain motivation throughout the undergraduate thesis writing process. One of the most common strategies was setting personal deadlines and creating structured writing schedules. This approach helped students monitor their progress, avoid procrastination, and stay accountable to their own goals.

“I used to have a plan every day and every evening. Well, it is the same with my undergraduate thesis. Initially, I had a target to graduate in June 2025, and I also wrote in my book that I wanted to graduate that month.”

In addition to time management, students employed creative tools to stay organized and reduce cognitive load. One particularly unique method was creating a personal WhatsApp group for self-reminders and resource storage. Such digital solutions were seen as simple yet effective ways to keep all relevant materials easily accessible and well-organized.

“I created a WhatsApp group with only me to save reference links and title ideas.”

Another key source of motivation came from social and emotional support, particularly from family members and close peers. Emotional encouragement served as a powerful reminder of their academic purpose and progress. Students also mentioned that seeing friends progress, or having shared struggles, created a sense of collective motivation.

“I am excited when my parents ask me, ‘How far have you come?’ Because they always support me.”

Beyond external encouragement, some students demonstrated internal resilience by reframing the undergraduate thesis not as an obligation but as a personal challenge or legacy. This shift in mindset allowed them to view the process more positively and feel a greater sense of autonomy.

“I did my undergraduate thesis not because my friends had graduated, but because I wanted to prove myself.”

In summary, these strategies reflect the three core elements of Self-Determination Theory: autonomy, in managing their own schedules and goals; competence, in organising and understanding their work; and relatedness, through emotional support from those closest to them. Through these adjustment mechanisms, students are able to regulate their motivation, maintain their efforts, and complete their bachelor's theses despite facing various obstacles.

DISCUSSION

The results revealed that intrinsic motivation played a dominant role in students' undergraduate thesis completion. Students were primarily driven by the desire to gain knowledge and achieve personal growth. This is supported by Howard et al. (2021), who emphasized the strong

connection between intrinsic motivation, academic persistence, and well-being. Similarly, Weiler and Murad (2022) found that intrinsically motivated students were more likely to complete their academic goals, as they viewed the task as meaningful and self-initiated.

The study also identified several challenges, with internal barriers such as procrastination and low self-regulation being the most common. Students struggled with maintaining discipline, especially when feeling confused or unsupported. This confirms Diasti and Mbato (2020) findings, where procrastination was prevalent among undergraduate thesis writers, but could be reduced through consistent motivation-regulation strategies. In addition, technical difficulties in topic selection and academic writing also decreased students' commitment. Difficulties in topic understanding often leads to reduced motivation (Prameswara & Hapsari, 2023).

To address these challenges, students applied various motivational strategies, such as setting personal deadlines, making structured plans, and seeking emotional support from family. These self-driven actions reflect strong intrinsic motivation and self-regulation (Rahayu & Moesarofah, 2022). Interestingly, peer competition was not seen as motivational. Instead, positive emotional support proved more impactful. This aligns with Vasconcellos et al. (2020), who found that peer support reduced amotivation and enhanced all forms of motivation, including controlled ones like introjected and external regulation.

Overall, the findings emphasize the central role of intrinsic motivation, supported by self-regulation and social encouragement, in helping students complete their undergraduate thesis.

CONCLUSION

This study provides a comprehensive understanding of the motivation of EFL students in writing their undergraduate thesis. The majority of students are intrinsically motivated, particularly driven by a desire for knowledge and accomplishment. Nonetheless, they encounter real challenges such as procrastination, academic isolation, and supervisor issues. To navigate these, students employ practical strategies that combine emotional resilience and academic planning. The findings underscore the relevance of SDT in explaining academic motivation and highlight the need for institutions to cultivate environments that foster intrinsic goals and supportive mentorship.

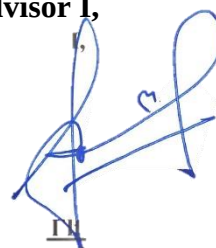
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Advisor I,



Sonny Elfiyanto, S.S., S.Pd., M.Pd., Ph.D.
NPP. 212801198032101