

# Learning motivation of Vietnamese EFL learners in fully online classes during Covid-19: A mixed methods study

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Learning motivation is a critical factor in learners' decision to commit, or not commit, to learning tasks. This study investigates the extent and working components of learning motivation in a fully online English as a foreign-language (EFL) course amid Covid-19, drawing upon data from focus groups and a survey delivered to 183 students in an English preparation course (EPC) which was conducted fully online via a video conferencing platform, *Google Meet*. Both data sources revealed that students were generally motivated both intrinsically and extrinsically, but extrinsic motivation seemed to be more powerful. Also, all components of motivation were found to be at play with *identified regulation* as the most significant influence. The study additionally reveals several factors which contribute greatly to learning motivation within the online course, including especially pedagogical strategies, teacher support, the perceived usefulness, effectiveness and entertainment values of the course among others. Based on the findings, pedagogical implications and recommendations for further research are discussed.

## Introduction

Recently, the development of technology has brought about unprecedented opportunities for the implementation of online or hybrid language courses (the combination of traditional face-to-face instruction and online components). However, language learning within a communicative framework is conventionally assumed to benefit from face-to-face interaction. Therefore, with the immersion of language learners into this new learning environment which is web-based and computer-assisted, aspects of motivation may be manifested and affect learning differently from the way they do in traditional classrooms (Pozón-López, Higuera-Castillo, Muñoz-Leiva & Liébana-Cabanillas, 2020).

Amid the Covid-19 pandemic, English classes throughout the world have been fully switched to distance or online learning due to school closures which are implemented as a measure in governments' efforts to contain the spread of the deadly virus. The fully sudden switch of learning mode has unavoidably entailed drastic changes in pedagogical tools (Bailey, Almusharraf & Hatcher, 2021) and strategies, and thus required much adaptation (Kukulska-Hulme, 2021; Yi & Jang, 2020), which is even more than what fully online learning itself requires in a normal situation (Wisneski, Ozogul, & Bichelmeyer, 2017). In such a landscape, learner motivation could be negatively affected; however, motivation in prolonged online language courses amid Covid-19 has been little researched (Bailey et al., 2021). Notably, while the adequacy and effectiveness of our responses to the crisis must be improved, current literature on learners' motivation in online language learning does not seem helpful given that research of this line mainly measures changes in motivation in courses which include the application of a certain CALL system with total or heavy reliance on quantitative data collection tools (see Bodnar, Cucchiari, Strik &

van Hout, 2016 for a review), and conducted mostly in blended learning rather than in the fully online environment. Therefore, it is necessary that learners' motivation in fully and prolonged online learning be closely examined.

Given the scarcity of research into L2 motivation from a qualitative account with adequate attention to the link between learning motivation and contextual factors in fully online courses, especially amid the Covid-19 pandemic, the current research is aimed to gain insights into EFL learners' motivation in a fully online course taking place during the second school closure in Vietnam starting in early May 2021. The research focuses on two research questions:

1. To what extent were learners motivated or not in the fully online English course amid Covid-19?
2. Which components of motivation were at play in the fully online English course amid Covid-19?

## **Literature review**

### **Motivation in language education**

Motivation has been widely accepted as a decisive factor in the success of second or foreign language learning. As claimed by Dörnyei (2009), motivation is the main drive that not only initiates language learning but also sustains the long process of learning afterward. Dörnyei also asserted that motivation can significantly compensate for both learners' insufficient language aptitudes and inadequate pedagogical conditions while the lack of motivation may fail even the most capable learners in achieving long-term learning goals regardless of the good curricula and adequate teaching. For its importance, motivation has been extensively researched in the field of language education. Despite being obtained from studies with different foci and research designs, research findings in the past decades have generally indicated a strong link between learning motivation and course engagement (Oga-Baldwin & Nakata, 2017; Oga-Baldwin, Nakata, Parker & Ryan, 2017) and learning achievement (Kim & Kim, 2018; Liu, 2020; Ushida, 2005).

In the early stage, second and foreign language (L2) learner motivation research was mainly framed by the social-psychological approach proposed by Gardner and his associates (for example, Gardner, 1985; Gardner & MacIntyre, 1993). This approach is characterised by the distinction between integrative and instrumental motivation, a light focus on the L2 teaching/learning context (Dörnyei, 2001), and heavy reliance on questionnaires conducted at one point of courses (Ushida, 2005), which may significantly limit the exploration power of research given the dynamic and multifaced nature of motivation. Since the 1990s, theories in the field have developed to be more comprehensive and research drawing on those theories both have a stronger focus on the situated processes that shape learning motivation and, thus, can better explain the complex construct of motivation (Dörnyei, 2001).

## Motivation in online language learning

Findings of language education research generally indicate that the effective inclusion of online components with the use of different computer-assisted language learning systems (CALLs) positively influences L2 learner motivation, including autonomous motivation (Pozón-López et al., 2020), and learning outcomes (Canals, 2020; Golonka, Bowles, Frank, Richards & Freynik, 2014), especially the improvement of oral language skills and abilities (Chen, 2021; Kato, Spring & Mori, 2016). It is found that language learner motivation and engagement are enhanced to several extents thanks to the affordance of online learning platforms in making it possible for learners to access rich resources (Cai & Zhu, 2012) and reach out for authentic audience/interlocutors (Cai & Zhu, 2012; Chen & Brown, 2011; Jauregi & Melchor-Couto, 2017). Also, useful features in the designs of those platforms and tools help to improve the quality of both asynchronous and synchronous interaction within classes (Yang, 2011). As a result, online learning makes learners more willing to interact, especially with foreigners, reduces their anxiety (Jauregi & Melchor-Couto, 2017), and boosts language learners' engagement and general learning experience (Cai & Zhu, 2012). However, it should be noted that suitable strategies to assist teachers to maintain effective pedagogical practices in such a rich-technology learning environment are critical (Tong & Trinidad, 2005).

Though the strengths of the online learning environment in improving learning motivation are multiple, there remain issues of concern. As mentioned, while ICT applications may reduce learners' anxiety in conversation with foreigners, online learners' anxiety in general remains a prominent concern, especially at the beginning of online courses (Ushida, 2005). Morton and Jack (2010) pointed out that the less positive learning experiences and high anxiety depend on the types of motivation that each learner possesses. That is, those who have low intrinsic and high extrinsic motivation may have a higher level of anxiety. Additionally, learners' perception of the online learning environment is found to be closely associated with their learning enjoyment; however, learners' perceived actual online learning environments could be significantly different from their preferred ones (Trinidad, Aldridge & Fraser, 2005).

Generally, despite high research interest in language learner motivation, there is a scarcity of research on L2-learner motivation in fully online learning. To the best of the author's knowledge, the only study which has looked at L2 motivation in a fully online course was conducted by Bailey et al. (2021). It measured the impact of intrinsic motivation on learning outcomes, drawing mostly on quantitative data that may limit its explorative power to several extents. Additionally, as the authors claimed, the roles of situated factors which may be at work in making the changes in L2 motivation, have not been investigated.

Currently, we are undergoing the biggest-ever disruption in the world's educational system due to Covid-19. The switch of learning modality from face-to-face to fully online mode was the only way to maintain education activities in many places, though it has caused course satisfaction to drop dramatically in the face of multiple challenges (Hazaea, Bin-Hady, & Toujani, 2021; Ozudogru, 2021; Sanderson, Spacey, Zhu, & Sterling-Morris,

2021). In such a situation, many adaptations and efforts are required from not only teachers but also students. For example, Cleofas (2021) has found that when classes are brought to the online environment, students might experience issues in mental health and the application of some self-care practices are useful to maintain students' learning motivation and wellbeing. In such turbulence, language learner motivation, however, remains under-researched although this is the aspect that should be closely examined (Bailey et al., 2021).

### Theoretical framework

Self-determination theory (SDT) (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Ryan & Deci, 2000), as claimed by Pintrich and Schunk (2002), is "one of the most comprehensive and empirically supported theories of motivation available today" (p. 257). Although being extensively used in educational research, SDT has not been commensurately established in online learning research. Chen and Jang (2010), therefore, claimed that SDT deserves a thorough investigation in addressing learner motivation in the online environment.

SDT features the distinction between self-directed and controlled motivation. The theory emphasises the dynamic nature of motivation in social contexts and posits that individuals' motivation is mediated by the satisfaction of their basic needs, including autonomy, competency, and relatedness. SDT theorises motivation into three categories of amotivation, extrinsic and intrinsic motivation. The desired development of learner motivation is characterised by the increasing sense of self and personal commitment to taking an action through the processes of *internalisation* and *integration*. This development consists of *amotivation* (a state of learners' lacking an intention to act), *extrinsic motivation* (including external, introjected, identified, and integrated regulation), and *intrinsic motivation*. Among elements of extrinsic motivation, external regulation refers to external demands or externally imposed rewards, which learners perform an activity to fulfill or achieve (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Introjected regulation refers to the state in which learners are internally regulated to perform or not to perform an act under external pressure such as the feeling of guilt, anxiety, or to gain personal pride or self-esteem. Identified regulation occurs when a behaviour has been identified with some importance for learners themselves. As for intrinsic motivation, it is associated with enjoyment and interest as the motives for performing a certain activity.

The value of SDT lies in the fact that it not only enables the understanding of individual learners' motivation in process but also helps educators prescribe for learner motivation enhancement. Drawing on SDT, several studies in the field of learner motivation in the online environment have identified strategies with which educators can assist the development of learner motivation (Chen & Jang, 2010; Reeve & Jang, 2006 among others). As such, SDT would be an appropriate framework for the current study to explore learners' perspectives of contextual factors that are influencing their learning experience and motivation in totally online English classes.

## Method

### Context

This study is part of wider research focused on the challenges and opportunities of fully online learning during the prolonged school closure in Vietnam, from early May 2021 to early 2022. The context of the research is FPT University, a large private metropolitan university in Hanoi, which provides courses in a variety of majors, especially in the field of information technology. At university entrance, students with English proficiency lower than 5.5 IELTS scores were required to complete an English Preparation Course (EPC) before learning subjects in their majors. The EPC consists of six levels from beginner to higher advanced levels. Each level was taught within an eight-week block. Students were assigned to suitable EPC classes based on the results of their placement tests. As such, the actual length of the EPC can vary for different students depending on their starting English levels. EPC aims to equip students with sufficient English competence in the four basic skills of English (listening, speaking, reading, and writing) for learning subjects of their majors in English. Classes in each level were based on a textbook set in the integrated-skill textbook series *University Success* published by Pearson Longman. At the time of data collection, there were EPC classes at intermediate, advanced, and higher advanced levels.

It should be noted that at this university, teaching and learning activities are highly technology-based. Classrooms are sound-proofed and equipped with a sound system, a projector, and high-speed access to Internet. Lecturers and students needed to use their laptops on daily basis for all pedagogical and administrative activities. During the second outbreak of Covid-19 in Vietnam from May 2021, EPC classes were switched to the online environment. At this time, all participants in this study had completed part of their EPC in the face-to-face mode. When being switched to the online mode, EPC classes were scheduled in the same way they had been in the traditional mode, with students having two 90-minute periods every weekday, either in the morning or afternoon, with a ten-minute break in between. Online classes were implemented via the synchronous video platforms of *Google Meet* and *MyEnglishlab* (a platform provided by Pearson Longman with exercises designed for each textbook section), with *Google Classroom* also used to assist students with further practice and interaction with teachers and peers beyond class time.

### Participants

The current study involved 183 EPC students who participated in a *Google Forms* survey. Participants were mostly male (68%), aged between 18 and early 20s. Seven of the surveyed students expressed interest in joining the focus-group interviews.

### Research design

To obtain insight into learners' motivation, which is often claimed to be a major shortcoming of motivational research (Bodnar et al., 2016), the current research was designed with two tools for data collection: questionnaires and focus-group interviews.

However, the study was principally qualitative in approach with survey data serving to guide the in-depth exploration of learners' perception of different aspects of their motivation via focus groups.

*Quantitative instrument: survey*

The survey used in the current study was adapted from a part of the survey that Standage, Duda and Ntoumanis (2005) developed to test self-determination theory in a school-based physical education (PE) course. The section exploring motivation in the original survey included 20 items arranged in five sections, each of which explored one stage of motivation development, namely *amotivation*, *external regulation*, *introjection*, *identification*, and *intrinsic motivation*. As the current study examined motivation in a different context, an English course instead of a PE course, and a fully online course rather than a traditional face-to-face setting, some adaptations were made to match the research setting of the current study. Given the minor role of the survey in the current study, and also the irrelevance of some of the original survey items in the current research, only twelve items from the survey of Standage et al. (2005) were selected for adaptation. The stem "PE" in original items was replaced by "English" where it was present. Also, the stem "*in this online course*" was added to all adapted items.

*Qualitative instrument: Focus group interviews*

Qualitative data in the current study were collected from semi-structured focus group interviews. This format was selected to enable the flow of participants' stories and the researcher to go with these. As such, the data collected would be richer and less predetermined; insights obtained thus would have more depth and breadth.

## **Procedures**

With permission obtained from the Academic Department, the author accessed email addresses for more than three hundred EPC students at that time. An invitation email, which included a brief introduction about the research, the voluntary nature of students' participation, the confidentiality of students' information, and the link to a *Google Forms* survey, was sent to all students. The survey was designed with a 5-point Likert scale format presented in Vietnamese. The use of students' mother-tongue in the survey was to facilitate their understanding of and responding to the items. The whole survey should require around fifteen minutes to complete, and the section for motivation which was designed to collect data for this study would take around seven minutes to complete.

The email sent to EPC students also included an invitation for focus groups, for which participants could express their interest by replying to the email or talking to their class teachers. There were seven volunteers and they were arranged into two focus groups based on their English proficiency: Focus Group 1 (FG1) included three advanced students and Focus Group 2 (FG2) included four intermediate students. Each focus group lasted for approximately one hour, giving a total of two hours of audio recorded data. Focus groups were also conducted in Vietnamese to enable students' in-depth discussion into the complex issue of motivation and the affective processes they were experiencing.

Data were collected during the first block of the summer semester starting in early May 2021 and finishing in late June 2021. The survey was opened for responses during the fourth week of the block and focus groups were conducted one week later (within the sixth week).

## Data analysis

### *Survey data*

Survey data were analysed preliminarily using *Google Forms* and presented in the percentage format. The data were then categorised into predetermined themes. Prominent patterns emerging from survey data functioned as guidelines for the discussion in the focus groups.

### *Interview data*

The two-hour recording from focus groups was listened to several times by the author to search for themes. Important excerpts of the interviews then were fully transcribed. Five subthemes were found and then categorised into two main themes: *the extent students were motivated*, and *amotivation*.

## Findings

### **Extent of student motivation: Extrinsic versus intrinsic**

Data show that both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation had a role to play in sustaining students' engagement in this online English course. Extrinsic motivation seemed to be more powerful with identified regulation as the leading drive. Though students appeared less affected by other elements of extrinsic motivation, such as introjected and external regulations, the pressure from self-judgment and rules that impact the possibility to pass the final examination still stood out as significant motives for students to maintain course participation.

### **The dominant role of extrinsic motivation**

#### *Identified regulation*

Identified regulation was revealed as the most powerful drive. Participants generally perceived English as a medium to improve their chances in and quality of their future life, and thus participating in the online English classes seriously to achieve a certain level of English proficiency was a strongly endorsed goal for most participants (Table 1). More than 90% of surveyed students reported attending online English classes regularly to improve their English skills (item 23) and 89% indicated doing so because of the importance of English in their future job and life (item 22). Focus-group data strongly resonated with survey data; six of the seven interviewed students reiterated the role of English competence in enhancing their chances in the job market including getting a good job in big companies (Yen, Nhung, An, Lang), being promoted or getting employed oversea (Lang), and getting a high salary (Yen, Nhung, Quang, Lang, Hai, An). Practical benefits of achieving English proficiency were also perceived as significant in the fields of education, sociality, and entertainment. One student, An, said he enjoyed reading things

on the Internet in English, which “enriches my knowledge of all fields”. Lang and Hai targeted a certain English level to further study overseas after university. Quang said that good English skills would enable him to travel and make friends easily. A wide network of international colleagues and friends was highlighted by Nhung and Yen as the reward for learning English well. As such, answers to the question of “*Why am I learning English?*” seem to be loud and clear to most of the students and inspired them to learn.

Table 1: Influences of identified regulation on course participation

Statement	SA	A	U	D	SD
22. I take part in this online class regularly because English skills are important for my job and other aspects of my life in the future.	73 39.9%	90 49.2%	19 10.4%	1 0.5%	0 0%
23. I take part in this online class regularly because I want to improve my English skills.	68 37.2%	97 53%	15 8.2%	3 1.6%	0 0%

Notes: SA (strongly agree), A (agree), U (unsure), D (disagree), SD (strongly disagree)

#### *Introjected regulation*

Regarding the involvement of ego, it seems that students were affected by others’ approving attitudes, but not to such a substantial extent as they were by their self-judgment (Table 2). Concerning the former, the number of surveyed students who (strongly) agreed that the favouring attitudes of teachers, parents, and friends towards them influenced their course participation constituted around 38% (for both items 24 and 25). However, the number of those who (strongly) disagreed with that point was even higher for both items (41.8% and 45.4% respectively). Focus-group data revealed a lighter impact of others’ attitudes in shaping students’ learning behaviours with only three participants confirming this influence on them. Interestingly, not all “others” had equal weight on students’ learning motivation. As mentioned, three participants confirmed the influence of parents/family’s attitudes while that of friends and teachers was not explicitly evident in focus-group data. Among the three mentioned participants, Yen revealed the fear of making her family “disappointed” or “angry” if she was lazy in learning. Hai claimed to have an expectation to live up to: “I am the only child and my family lay a lot of hope on me. Sometimes I feel like skipping classes but I force myself not to do so”. An acknowledged the importance of his image in the eye of “others” saying:

I have a face... I mean being seen by others as intelligent and capable is tempting... But learning online has many challenges like...distractions, movies, games, and no one can really control us. So, only our determination to achieve our learning goals and our interest in learning can help overcome all these.

Seemingly, though the favour of others had a role to play, this role was not the main motive to keep the student committed to his online learning.

Regarding the impact of self-judgment, the sense of guilt itself was significant in motivating students to learn. Nearly 60% of surveyed students indicated that they

participated in the online English classes regularly because they would feel bad if doing otherwise (item 26), while only a small proportion of 14.8% disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement. Five focus-group participants also reiterated that point reporting some forms of guilt that kept them focusing on learning regardless of distractions. One representative student, Hai, said:

In online classes, to ensure that everyone can listen to our teacher and friends clearly, our micro and video are often turned off. So, you know, I can do whatever... like sleeping, watching movies or playing games, whatever... But most of the time I just think if I do so, I am wasting my time and my parents' money.

In the face of distraction, it was the students' sense of responsibility and determination that were acting to maintain learning motivation.

Table 2: The influences of introjected regulation in course participation

Statement	SA	A	U	D	SD
24. I take part in this online class regularly because I want the teacher/my parents to think I'm a good student.	26 14.1%	44 23.9%	37 20.1%	54 29.3%	23 12.5%
25. I take part in this online class regularly because I want other students to think I'm skillful in English.	24 13.1%	47 25.7%	29 15.8%	68 37.2%	15 8.2%
26. I take part in this online class regularly because I would feel bad about myself if I didn't.	46 25.1%	59 32.2%	51 27.9%	20 11%	7 3.8%

Notes: SA (strongly agree), A (agree), U (unsure), D (disagree), SD (strongly disagree)

#### *External regulation*

External factors such as pressure from teachers do not seem to be strongly influential (Table 3). Only 25% of survey participants indicated the fear of being yelled at by teachers as a reason for them to attend the online English classes regularly, while nearly 50% of them disagreed with that point (item 29). However, more than half of surveyed participants agreed or strongly agreed that they attended the online classes regularly because it was a rule to do so (item 27), and because of the consequences of not following the rule (item 28). The discussion revealed that a critical condition for students at this university to be eligible for the final-term examination of a subject was to attend 80% of all classes in the subject. Three students (Dung, Quang, and Yen) explicitly claimed that they did not want to spend time and money studying the subject again.

However, the other four students highlighted reasons for taking the course seriously other than the rule or its subsequent troubles. Lang claimed to be so interested in learning English and self-disciplined that the rule never constituted an issue for him. For Hai, his goal was much higher than the requirement for class attendance: "Achieving 5.5 or 6 IELTS score within this year to study overseas is not easy for me. I have to try much harder than just attending classes regularly". However, it should be noted that students who volunteered to participate in focus groups might be keener English learners than

average. This may explain the differences sometimes emerging between survey and interview data with the latter often presenting slightly more positive views and stronger learning motivation.

Table 3: The influences of external regulation

Statements	SA	A	U	D	SD
27. I take part in this online class regularly because that is the rule.	30 16.4%	73 39.9%	34 18.6%	38 20.8%	8 4.4%
28. I take part in this online class regularly because I will be in trouble if I do not.	38 20.7%	62 33.9%	37 20%	37 20%	9 5%
29. I take part in this online class regularly so that teachers won't yell at me.	20 10.9%	27 14.8%	46 25.1%	55 30%	35 19.1%

Notes: SA (strongly agree), A (agree), U (unsure), D (disagree), SD (strongly disagree)

### Significant Intrinsic motivation

Table 4: The influence of intrinsic motivation on course participation

Statements	SA	A	U	D	SD
19. I take part in this online class regularly because it is fun.	32 17.5%	51 27.9%	76 41.5%	14 7.7%	10 5.4%
20. I take part in this online class regularly because of the enjoyment that I feel while learning new skills in English/new knowledge of the English language.	32 17.5%	76 41.5%	63 34.4%	6 3.3%	6 3.3%
21. I take part in this online class regularly because the English language is interesting.	22 12%	23 12.6%	57 31.1%	35 19.1%	46 25.1%

Notes: SA (strongly agree), A (agree), U (unsure), D (disagree), SD (strongly disagree)

Despite the challenging nature of fully online learning amid COVID-19, intrinsic motivation remained significant and contributed greatly to learners' course engagement. Table 4 shows that though students' interest in the English language itself was humble (24.6%) (item 21), the joy of obtaining new knowledge of the English language/new skills in English (item 20) and of having fun classes (item 19) was a rich source of motivation for almost 60% and 45% of surveyed students respectively. However, a significant number of students could not be assertive about whether they found any joy in learning new things (34.4%), in the online English classes themselves (41.5%), or they might be unsure whether the joy they felt was significant enough to maintain their learning persistence.

Focus-group data revealed stronger evidence for the influence of intrinsic motivation. Four of the seven interviewees confirmed that they enjoyed the feeling of learning something new after each class. Participants mainly attributed this rewarding feeling to teachers' in-time support and effective pedagogy. Though confirming that online learning was somehow more challenging in terms of communication without the physical presence

of her teachers and friends, Yen claimed that “our teacher always makes sure we achieve lesson objectives by asking us if we understand and helped us devotedly”. Lang and An also highlighted the connection between increasing space for students’ autonomy in online classes and their enhanced enjoyment.

In the online classes, there are more projects and assignments. Teachers often give us more time to do research when working on those projects in pairs or groups. I kind of love the preparation time. I can find a lot of interesting information and useful language to use for our projects. I like such discovery. (An)

This experience was described by Lang as “learning effectively and freely”. However, this joyful experience was not reported by the other three. Among those, Dung, stated that “I just don’t feel motivated or anything when learning something... I mean sometimes you get things, sometimes you don’t from classes... It is just normal”.

Regarding the role of fun in online English classes, focus-group data illuminate survey results showing that despite the undesirable switch of learning mode, English classes were still an exciting experience for many students. Five focus-group members claimed that they had chances to laugh together and so “online classes were not as tedious as I was afraid” (Nhung). All members of the advanced group (Nhung, An, and Lang) mentioned their teachers’ provision of hot and challenging topics for discussions and debates, which “stimulates classroom atmosphere” (Lang) and that “we sometimes have exciting time arguing about things” (An). Besides, students’ creativity in classroom activities was also reported to contribute greatly to the joy students felt.

You know, the project can be a play, a talk show, or just a presentation about a certain topic. We kind of...create the plot, write the script, rehearse in groups and then perform to the class. Some stories are funny. Some groups have interesting performances. For example, a group try to use English intonations in a... like... hilarious way to express their characters’ emotions and make people laugh... it is good (laugh). (Nhung-FG1)

As for Hai and Quang (FG2), they liked online games on platforms such as *Kaboot* and *Quizlet* within his online English classes to assist students’ consolidation of English vocabulary.

I *like* them [games]. They are competitive. It is like... very thrilling to see your *scores* and rank upgraded or downgraded. It is also very painful to see others get ahead of you (laugh) (Hai).

Considering the last source of intrinsic motivation - students’ interest in the English language, interview data slightly differ from survey data. Despite the low interest in the English language indicated in the survey data, four focus-group participants said the language itself inspired them in learning and contributed to their course commitment. Majoring in fields other than English study, An, Lang, Nhung, and Quang all shared the point that English was interesting though for different reasons. For An, English was the language of his favorite American movies and he had a “wish to speak English the way American people do”. Nhung said the language was “just beautiful” and she wanted to be

a competent user of the language. Lang shared Nhung's point and added that English was also highly accurate. As for Quang, who had learned Japanese for a couple of years before, he found "English is completely different" and he enjoyed "experiencing the differences".

## Amotivation

Table 5: The extent of students' amotivation

Statement	SA	A	U	D	SD
30. I take part in this online class but I feel I am wasting my time.	14 7.7%	34 18.6%	51 27.9%	60 32.7%	24 13.1%

Notes: SA (strongly Agree), A (agree), U (unsure), D (disagree), SD (strongly disagree)

The last item in the survey was to identify students' amotivation, if any. Just around one-fourth of surveyed students thought this online course was a waste of time while nearly half of them (strongly) disagreed with that statement. In focus groups, none of the participants said the course was useless. Instead, they all expressed a certain level of satisfaction with the course and with their progress. However, focus-group participants generally indicated the limitation of communication in the online classes though some students noted these issues were "manageable" (Lang). An further affirmed that "even in online or offline classes, how much you can communicate with others depends on how willing you are to create the chances for yourself". For other students like Yen, Hai, and Nhung, the mentioned limitations were mainly attributed to the lack of face-to-face contact and led to a certain level of emotional distress.

## Discussion

*Research question 1: To what extent were learners motivated or not in a fully online English course amid Covid-19?*

Online learning amid Covid-19 has been associated with multiple challenges (Hazaea et al., 2021; Sanderson et al., 2021) and, thus, may influence course satisfaction and motivation. In the current study, the switch of English classes totally to the online environment was also found to negatively affect learning motivation to some extent. A group of surveyed students indicated that online learning was demotivating while focus groups revealed some challenges making students less satisfied with the course, especially in terms of within-class communication. This finding is in line with the research by Spring, Kato and Mori (2019), who found that participation in oral tasks in online classes via synchronous video conferencing platforms (such as *Google Meet* or *Skype*) was poorer among a group of students and subsequently led to other students' perception of less within-class interaction and reduced their course satisfaction as a result.

However, fully online English learning amid Covid-19 could also be perceived by students as a positive experience regardless of challenges (for example, Ja'ashan 2020). Lending its support to such a finding, the current study indicated that students were generally motivated, both intrinsically and extrinsically. With regards to extrinsic motivation, in line

with Eccles (2005), this study found that students' perception of the usefulness of English and English learning for their future life was directly linked to their decision of sustaining their course participation and engagement. With regards to intrinsic motivation, pedagogical practices, including especially teachers' strong support and adapted strategies, clearly enhanced learning inspiration. In a previous study, Phuong and Phuong (2019) found that even in face-to-face classes, teachers' support (in the form of feedback provision, for example) was perceived to strengthen teacher-student rapport; teacher support seemed to have also a huge role in creating and maintaining English learners' positive affection in the online-learning environment. Pedagogical adaptation was significantly evident in the inclusion of more interesting interaction-based activities (discussion, presentations, debates, and group projects), higher gamified class content, and the provision of more space for students' creativity and autonomy. Apparently, teachers already paid more attention to the appropriation of pedagogy during this second school closure in Vietnam to better address different aspects of learners' basic needs including competence, autonomy, and relatedness. As proposed in SDT (Ryan, 1995), the satisfaction of those needs is critical in mediating learning motivation.

*Research question 2: Which components of motivation were at play for learners in the fully online English course amid Covid-19?*

Findings in this research are consistent with the current e-learning literature confirming that both extrinsic and intrinsic motivation are crucial for learning success. However, contrary to the usual claims of the dominant role of intrinsic motivation, this study found that Vietnamese EFL learners were more strongly motivated by external factors in their online course. In their research on the implementation of online learning, Bhuasiri, Xaymoungkhoun, Zo, Rho and Ciganek (2012) also found that intrinsic motivation may not be as important as extrinsic motivation in the context of developing countries. Within extrinsic motivation, identified regulation was shown to be the most powerful though introjected and external regulation also took a significant part. Notably, while externally motivated students are normally claimed to seek approval and praise from others (Knowles & Kerkman, 2007), those in the current study seemed to be more impacted by their self-judgment and pressure of passing examinations rather than by others' judgemental attitudes.

Intrinsic motivation followed with students widely reporting to be inspired to learn by the playfulness, stimulation, and effectiveness of interactional activities. This finding is highly in resonance with the research by Pozón-López et al. (2020), which showed that the perceived effectiveness, quality, and entertainment value of a course are critical in enhancing learners' intrinsic motivation.

## **Conclusion**

This study explores learning motivation in a fully online English course amid Covid-19 drawing upon data from focus-group interviews and questionnaires. It found that students were both extrinsically and intrinsically motivated with extrinsic motivation being slightly

more influential. Among components of extrinsic motivation, identified regulation was revealed as the most significant while other components were also reported to have a role. Factors contributing to learning motivation were also identified, including teachers' support, adapted pedagogy, modalities of online platforms, and students' learning goals and autonomy. Findings highlighted the role of pedagogical strategies and teachers' efforts in enhancing intrinsic motivation and the roles of learners' determination in pursuing learning goals and a sense of responsibility in maintaining extrinsic motivation. The findings of the current research provide several important implications for further research and pedagogy as discussed below.

As both extrinsic and intrinsic motivations were important in prolonged online learning, attention and effort need to be allocated to boost both motivation types. Due to the importance of extrinsic motivation, a system of incentives should be developed to leverage this motivation type by, for example, using bonuses or rewards for participation and good performance during online courses. As for intrinsic motivation, challenging oral teamwork and gamified activities seem to be good sources of fun. The former, however, was more strongly indicated by advanced students. In the same vein, Spring et al. (2019) noted that the affordances of video conferencing platforms such as *Google Meet* could only benefit oral skill development and trigger motivation for learners who were at least at intermediate level of oral proficiency. In the situation when English classes of all levels have to be switched online, to ensure learners' participation and learning motivation, oral teamwork may need to be carefully designed with suitable levels of challenge to fit with students' specific proficiency. They may also need sequencing with increasing levels of challenge to effectively scaffold the gradual but firm development of learners' oral skills. With regards to the gamification of learning content, Phuong (2020b) found a welcoming attitude among Vietnamese EFL learners. This study extended that finding showing that gamification greatly enhanced learning motivation in fully online English classes. Given the new emergence of this method in Vietnamese ELT (Phuong, 2020b) and a tight time budget facing EFL teachers in a country like Vietnam to explore and implement new teaching methods (Phuong, 2020a), teachers may need official encouragement from administrative levels to include this element in their classes and may also need training in how to do so effectively.

Besides, students have been reported to appreciate teachers' efforts towards appropriate pedagogical practices for maintaining their engagement during online courses amid the Covid-19 pandemic (Soesanto & Dirgantoro, 2021). Students hereby were also found to enjoy a larger space provided by teachers to explore and construct new knowledge in the online classes. As such, teachers may consider allowing students to take a greater part in the decision-making process including designing class activities, and selecting topics/sub-topics for oral group works and learning materials.

### **Limitations and future directions**

The limitation of this study is that it was conducted at one of the top-rank technology universities in Vietnam, where both teachers and students were highly competent in ICT given their teaching and learning experience in a hi-tech environment well before Covid-

19. This technological background might have differentiated the learning experience and learning motivation of students in this study from those undergoing online learning amid Covid-19 in other contexts. The findings, therefore, may not be readily generalised for all higher-education institutions in Vietnam or other EFL contexts. However, the contribution of this study is a valuable insight into how the effective utilisation of technology and appropriate pedagogical strategies may facilitate learning motivation in prolonged online learning within, and even beyond, the pandemic crisis.

The study strongly indicated the importance of pedagogical strategies and the perceived usefulness of fully online English courses in generating and enhancing learning motivation. Therefore, I would call for follow up research which may include some tools to measure learners' performance, to systematically identify and inform online English teachers about strategies that work most effectively to promote learning motivation and enhance learning outcomes.

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## Appendix 1: Student questionnaire (English)

1. Age: .....
2. Gender: Male:  Female:
3. Your major of study: .....
4. Level of English you are studying:
 

Beginner	<input type="checkbox"/>
Elementary	<input type="checkbox"/>
Pre-intermediate	<input type="checkbox"/>
Intermediate	<input type="checkbox"/>
Advanced	<input type="checkbox"/>
Higher advanced	<input type="checkbox"/>
5. Number of blocks in the English Preparation Course (EPC) you have completed: .....
6. Number of blocks in EPC you have learned fully-online (not including this block): .....

*Follow up interview*

If you would be interested in taking part in a follow-up interview of around 30 minutes, please let me know by replying to the invitation email.

The interview would be conducted in a group of 2-4 students. It would involve discussing questions similar to those in this questionnaire but in greater depth.

Whether you take part in or do not take part in the interview, your marks or performance will not be affected in any way.

PLEASE NOW COMPLETE THE QUESTIONS BELOW – THANK YOU VERY MUCH

Please respond to each statement below using a check (✓) in the correct column. Choose from:

1 (Strongly agree), 2 (Agree), 3 (Maybe), 4 (Disagree), or 5 (Strongly disagree).

	1	2	3	4	5
19 I take part in this online class regularly because it is fun.					
20 I take part in this online class regularly because of the enjoyment that I feel while learning new skills in English/new knowledge of the English language.					
21 I take part in this online class regularly because the English language is interesting.					
22 I take part in this online class regularly because English skills are important for my job and other aspects of my life in the future.					
23 I take part in this online class regularly because I want to improve my English skills.					
24 I take part in this online class regularly because I want the teacher/my parents to think I'm a good student.					
25 I take part in this online class regularly because I want other students to think I'm skillful in English.					
26 I take part in this online class regularly because I would feel bad about myself if I didn't.					
27 I take part in this online class regularly because that is the rule.					
28 I take part in this online class regularly because I will be in trouble if I do not.					
29 I take part in this online class regularly so that teachers won't yell at me.					
30 I take part in this online class but I feel I am wasting my time.					

THANK YOU

(Note: Items from 1 to 18 in the survey are related to content other than learning motivation and thus are not included here)

## Appendix 2: Student focus group guidelines (English)

### A. Students' extrinsic motivation

- Do you attend your online English classes regularly? What are the main reasons for you to do so? What are the main reasons for you not to do so?
- Is your participation and attendance in this online English course influenced by your desire to make your parents and teachers pleased about you? why? Why not?
- Are your learning attitude and efforts in your online English classes influenced by the desire to become a good English learner in your friends' eyes? Why? Why not?
- Are there any rules about class attendance and participation for you in your fully online English classes? Are there any consequences for you if you do not follow the rules? Do these consequences influence your class attendance and participation? Why? Why not?
- Do you feel bad if you skip classes or do not seriously pay attention during classes?
- Do you attend the online English classes seriously to avoid being yelled at by your teachers?

### B. Students' intrinsic motivation

- Do you find your fully online English classes fun? If yes, which make it fun?
- Do you have the feeling of enjoyment when learning new skills in English and new knowledge of English language in your online classes? If yes, does this enjoyment play a part in keeping you motivated in your learning?
- Do you find English language itself interesting? Why? Why not?

### C. Amotivation

- Do you think learning English fully online is a waste of time? Why? Why not?

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