Intrinsic Motivation in the English Language Classrooms in Government Schools: Perspectives of a Self-Determination Theory

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Abstract

Intrinsic motivation plays a vital role in promoting autonomy and meaningful engagement with language learning. This study explores the English language teaching in five government secondary schools in Guwahati, Assam, focusing on Class IX and X students. Drawing on Self-Determination Theory (SDT), the research investigates how intrinsic motivation is fostered or hindered through classroom practices and teacher perspectives. Findings reveal that teachers in schools affiliated with the Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) use more autonomy-supportive strategies. In contrast, the Secondary Education Board of Assam (SEBA) classrooms were more teacher-centred, with fewer motivational strategies, although some teachers showed interest in adopting more student-focused methods. The study highlights the importance of SDT-aligned pedagogy in enhancing teacher and learner intrinsic motivation in government ESL classrooms.

Keywords: Intrinsic motivation, learner, English class, Central Board of Secondary Education, Secondary Education Board of Assam, self-determinism theory (SDT)

Introduction

Learning English can be challenging when learners are hindered by fear, shame, or limited opportunities to use English. This situation becomes even more concerning in classroom settings where students struggle to use the language correctly, yet must pass exams to advance. Such

scenarios can lead to decreased motivation and increased frustration among learners.

Creating a learning environment where students feel motivated to attend class and learn English is essential. Focusing on the motivation and well-being of learners is crucial to helping them effectively learn and use English. The Self-Determination Theory (SDT) has been extensively applied in education to enhance and sustain students' motivation and well-being. Its central premise is that when individuals' need for autonomy, competence, and relatedness is satisfied, they are more likely to experience intrinsic motivation, leading to better performance and well-being.

SDT has been unexplored in the Indian ESL context. There are not many studies on intrinsic motivation in government schools. Comparing CBSE and SEBA boards, this study fills the gap of limited research on intrinsic motivation in government secondary schools.

Motivation in L2 Learning in Schools

Educators and researchers recognise that motivation is central to second or foreign language (L2) learning. It is a crucial determinant of how quickly and successfully a learner acquires a new language (Dörnyei, 2009). Motivation provides the initial drive that encourages learners to study the language and sustains their effort over the long and often challenging language-learning journey.

Ryan and Deci's *Self-Determination Theory* (2017) emphasises that motivation is not a binary state but exists on a continuum, from amotivation to extrinsic and intrinsic motivation. Intrinsically motivated learners—meaning they learn for the activity's inherent satisfaction and personal value—are more likely to engage deeply and persistently. By contrast, those who are amotivated or only externally pressured may show superficial or short-lived effort. When learners' needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness are satisfied, intrinsic motivation flourishes, leading to greater internalisation of language goals and improved learning outcomes (Levesque et al., 2004; Noels et al., 2000). Conversely, when these needs are frustrated, learners risk disengagement and poor performance (Sugita-McEown & Oga-Baldwin, 2019).

Research on intrinsic motivation highlights the nature of an autonomy-supporting learning environment. Practices, like respecting students'

perspectives, offering meaningful choices, offering rationale for tasks, minimising pressure, using non-controlling language using contextually relevant tasks, encouraging self-initiation and having a clear classroom structure (Deci et al., 1981; Grolnick & Ryan, 1987; Guimarães et al., 2002; Jang et al., 2010; Jang et al., 2009; Mitchell, 1993; Patall, 2019; Reeve, 2012; Reeve & Jang, 2006; Ryan & Deci, 2000) and make less assessment demands (Kage & Namiki, 1990; Ryan & Grolnick, 1986) support autonomy of learners. These studies highlight that teachers' instructional style and classroom environment are powerful influencers for fostering intrinsic motivation. Through a meta-analysis, Patall et al. (2008) established that providing individuals with meaningful choices significantly enhances intrinsic motivation, task performance, and perceived competence. Their findings lend empirical support to the core tenets of SDT, particularly the importance of autonomy in educational contexts.

Ryan et al. (1997) describe intrinsic motivation as an evolved psychological propensity—an inherent inclination shaped by evolution—to explore, learn, and face challenges self-directedly. Their theoretical framework integrates psychological and neurobiological perspectives to argue that autonomy is fundamental to healthy self-regulation and development. Burton et al. (2006) noted that intrinsic motivation is linked to psychological well-being regardless of academic success.

Together, these studies highlight that teachers' instructional style, teacher practices, and classroom design influence motivation for learning.

The Present Study

This study focuses on two types of government schools: the aided Secondary Education Board of Assam (SEBA) and the Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) affiliated schools. It tries to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the characteristics of an autonomy-supporting environment in English classrooms of CBSE and SEBA schools?
2. What are teacher's intrinsic motivation characteristics in English classrooms at CBSE and SEBA schools?

Methodology

The sample for the study consisted of five schools in Guwahati – three SEBA affiliated schools and two CBSE schools. The study was limited to English

language classes. Data was collected using Classroom Observations and teacher interviews. After seeking the informed consent of teachers and students, Classes IX and X were observed. The observation provided an understanding of the classroom structure. While the larger study focused on six themes: Class Structure, Teaching Methods, Teacher–Student Interaction, Content Organisation, Instructional Support, and Emotional Support, this paper is limited to Class Structure. The four elements observed within the classroom structure are (a) a review of the previous content, (b) an overview of the lesson, (c) a summary of key points, and (d) preparation for the next class. The observations were rated on a four-point scale comprising Excellent, Acceptable, Could Improve and Not Observed. The Class Structure analysis was intended to understand how it facilitates or hinders intrinsic motivation in government schools.

In addition, seven English teachers (covering both types of government schools) were interviewed to explore their intrinsic motivation, classroom experiences, challenges, and teaching strategies used to nurture motivation.

Findings and Discussion

Characteristics of Autonomy-Supported Classrooms

The findings of the study on Class Structure are presented in Table 1. The class structure was understood using four points of observation, namely, (a) reviews previous content, (b) presents an overview of lessons, (c) summarises key points, and (d) directs preparation for the next class. Since no data was obtained for the 'not observed' category, it is not shown in this table.

Table 1: *Ratings on the Four Elements of Classroom Structure*

Four Elements of Classroom Structure	*Boards*	*Excellent*	*Acceptable*	*Could Improve*
Reviews previous day's course content	*CBSE*	*1*	*1*	
	SEBA			*3*
Gives overview of day's course content	*CBSE*	*1*	*1*	
	SEBA		*1*	*2*
Summarises course content covered	*CBSE*	*1*	*1*	
	SEBA			*3*

Directs students' preparation for next class	CBSE	1	1	
	SEBA		1	2

The findings on reviews previous day's course content show that in CBSE schools, one class was rated 'excellent' and another 'acceptable', whereas all three SEBA classes were marked under 'could improve'.

This indicates that CBSE teachers were more consistent in recapping prior lessons, a crucial strategy to help learners connect with ongoing content, and an important indicator of intrinsic engagement. Teachers who begin lessons by revisiting earlier material create space for students to mentally prepare and reflect, often revealing learners' interest and involvement. For instance, in one CBSE classroom, the teacher's practice of reviewing prior content and offering students a roadmap for upcoming lessons demonstrated a clear effort to support learner autonomy and cognitive engagement an approach that aligns with fostering reflective engagement and intrinsic motivation, as described by Ryan and Deci (2002), who emphasised that the satisfaction of autonomy, competence, and relatedness needs enhances students' internal motivation to learn. This strategy benefited students who were absent in the previous class, even while helping those who were present. In the other CBSE school, the practice of reviewing previous day's course content was at an acceptable level.

In the SEBA schools, three classes were observed, and there were considerable opportunities for improvement. Teachers often started lessons abruptly, either by asking students to open books or shifting directly to new content without linkage. This kind of environment does not nurture intrinsic motivation, as it bypasses learner reflection and engagement with previously learned material.

Reeve (2006) highlights that when teachers neglect cognitive scaffolding, such as offering clear rationales, helping students link ideas, and encouraging reflective thought, they inadvertently undermine students' autonomy and engagement. In short, helping students connect new content with prior knowledge, structuring lessons in meaningful ways, and inviting reflection is a core part of autonomy-supportive instruction. Without it, students may follow lessons passively, without internalising or valuing the learning, which limits deep engagement.

The second autonomy-supporting practice relates to the teacher giving an *overview of the day's course content*. The findings reveal that one CBSE

class was rated 'excellent' and the other 'acceptable', while two SEBA classes fell under 'could improve', and only one was rated 'acceptable'. In two SEBA classes, the teachers randomly began the lesson by explaining the material without context or asking students to read aloud, without offering an overview. In the third school, the teacher's approach was acceptable but could still be enhanced to ensure students are aware of and engaged with the day's learning objectives.

Providing students with a preview of what they will have to learn enhances transparency, relevance, and learner autonomy, all of which are associated with increased motivation and engagement. The excellent performance in one CBSE class is likely to foster student curiosity with a clear understanding of learning goals. Clear summaries and preparation guidance of teachers helped students understand what was expected, thereby reducing confusion and enhancing task ownership, a key component of autonomous motivation. According to Deci and Ryan (1985), task clarity and support allow learners to internalise goals and experience greater autonomy, which is critical for fostering intrinsic engagement in the classroom.

On the third item, *summarising the course content covered*, CBSE teachers again showed better performance (1 excellent, 1 acceptable) compared to SEBA (3 marked as could improve). In all three SEBA, teachers ended the lessons abruptly when the bell rang without summarising the day's content. This lack of closure tends to leave students without a clear understanding of the material covered that day.

Summarising enables learners to consolidate knowledge and feel accomplished, boosting engagement and wellness. As seen from the data, the absence of this practice in SEBA classrooms may result in reduced clarity, satisfaction, and intrinsic drive among students. In classrooms where teachers did not establish clear learning objectives or provide summarising closures, the instructional style tended to be more teacher-centred and directive. This led to a compliance-based classroom dynamic, where students followed instructions passively, often by reading aloud or responding to prompts without meaningful engagement or conceptual understanding. Such an approach aligns with controlled motivation, as per SDT, where students act out of obligation rather than genuine interest or personal value. Vansteenkiste et al. (2004) found that when students perceive low autonomy and are pressured to comply rather than explore, their engagement decreases, and psychological

well-being suffers due to a diminished sense of ownership and volition in their learning process.

The fourth feature of an autonomy-supporting English classroom is *directing students' preparation for the next class*. The findings show that in one CBSE class, the teacher set students' expectations for the subsequent class (excellent level), while the other CBSE class showed an 'acceptable' level.

The CBSE teachers ended the lesson by explicitly asking students to reflect on what they had learned during the session and instructed them to prepare specific textbook pages for the next class. In contrast, only one SEBA school showed acceptable levels of setting expectations, while in the other two schools, there was scope for improvement. Teachers did not clearly indicate what learners should do before the next session, which diminished students' sense of direction and self-regulation. In SEBA classrooms, lessons ended abruptly with no attempt by the teacher to summarise the session, offer follow-up tasks, or encourage students to reflect on what they had learned. This reactive, time-bound approach represents a missed opportunity to build continuity and promote a deeper connection to the learning process.

Preparing students for the next class fosters learner autonomy, giving them control over their learning process and expectations. In the CBSE classes, where teachers gave clear instructions for preparing students for the next class, promoted organisation and empowered students to take responsibility for their learning, an essential condition for autonomy-support under SDT. Autonomy-supportive teaching practices foster an intrinsic orientation towards learning. Encouraging reflection allows students to process information meaningfully, while offering preparatory guidance promotes a sense of competence and personal relevance. According to Niemiec and Ryan (2009), such behaviours are critical to supporting students' basic psychological needs, particularly autonomy and competence, which are foundational for developing intrinsic motivation.Their study emphasised that when educators support students' sense of ownership and understanding of their learning, learners become more engaged, self-regulated, and motivated. Thus, the CBSE teacher's approach reflects a classroom climate conducive to intrinsic motivation, as described in SDT, reinforcing the positive link between autonomy support and student engagement.

In contrast, the SEBA data highlights a lack of consistent guidance. Such environments may not adequately support intrinsic motivation since students are not encouraged to engage proactively with future content. As an illustration, in the SEBA classrooms, lessons ended abruptly when the school bell rang, with no attempt by the teacher to summarise the session, offer follow-up tasks, or encourage students to reflect on what they had learned. This reactive, time-bound approach represents a missed opportunity to build continuity and promote a deeper connection to the learning process. According to Reeve and Jang (2006), autonomy-supportive teaching includes not only allowing students' choice but also structuring activities that help learners internalise the value of the lesson. When teachers fail to provide closure or direction for continued learning, students are less likely to find personal relevance or purpose in their academic work, which reduces the likelihood of intrinsic engagement. Therefore, this lack of reflective or forward-looking closure in SEBA classrooms reflects a more controlled teaching environment, impeding the conditions necessary for fostering intrinsic motivation.

On the whole, CBSE schools show more intrinsically motivated English classrooms than SEBA classrooms. CBSE teachers demonstrated substantial efforts in structuring lessons in ways that enable them to recognise signs of intrinsic motivation in students, unlike SEBA teachers, whose methods limited such insights. The findings lead to the interpretation that autonomous teaching practices in CBSE schools contributed to a more engaging and motivational environment, in contrast to SEBA schools' less reflective, more controlled instruction. They also highlight the two boards' varying levels of instructional quality and raise concerns about student readiness, engagement, and understanding in SEBA schools.

Characteristics of Intrinsically Motivated Teachers

Teachers in SEBA and CBSE schools expressed the view that their motivation is important for students' learning and their internal motivation influences how they teach. The school environment in SEBA schools is generally challenging. Despite resource limitations, SEBA school teachers showed intrinsic motivation to improve learning outcomes. For example, a teacher in one SEBA school was constrained by a lack of infrastructure, such as printers and supplementary materials. Yet she sought creative ways to enrich her lessons. She borrowed

resource-rich materials from private schools; she valued student engagement, demonstrating a deep commitment to fostering autonomy and competence among learners. This dedication, however, is tempered by feelings of professional insecurity and social stigma, underscoring the emotional vulnerability teachers face in under-resourced settings.

Newly appointed teachers also displayed intrinsic motivation rooted in their professional experiences. They recognised the critical importance of early and continuous English language instruction, striving to bridge gaps caused by late admissions and uneven prior learning. These teachers felt driven to support all students, adapting their practices to diverse learner needs, even when confronted with significant challenges in student competence, socio-economic backgrounds and motivation.

In the classroom, motivated teachers employed flexible and student-centred approaches. They used code-switching extensively to teach English, mixing Assamese and English. They also conducted interactive activities like Just a Minute (JAM) to lower affective barriers and build student confidence. They encouraged students to speak English without fear of making mistakes, so that it promotes competence and autonomy. Using relatable topics and informal oral tasks helps shy or reluctant learners express themselves and build confidence.They encouraged participation and risk-taking in language use, valuing effort over perfection. This approach enhances students' autonomy and reflects the teachers' intrinsic drive to create a supportive and engaging learning environment.

Their emotional investment in students is further evidence of teachers' intrinsic motivation. Describing students as *like my own children*, they nurtured strong relational bonds, which fostered trust and relatedness and increased student motivation. Such relational warmth is a critical source of resilience and persistence for teachers, especially when motivation fluctuates among students or external pressures demand compliance with rigid, exam-focused teaching methods.

The journey of intrinsic motivation is not without struggle. Many teachers initially face resistance when introducing innovative pedagogies, contending with colleagues and parents who prioritise rote memorisation and high marks over meaningful learning. Over time, with experience and seniority, teachers gain greater autonomy and agency, allowing them to adopt more flexible, learner-centred methods.

However, systemic barriers and traditional expectations often persist, limiting the full expression of their intrinsic motivation.

To sum up, teachers in Guwahati CBSE schools and, to some extent, in SEBA schools adopt several autonomy-supportive practices despite systemic challenges. They create emotionally supportive environments, treat students with care and respect, and use practical strategies such as code-switching and interactive activities to scaffold learning and reduce anxiety.

Many teachers persist in promoting learner-centred methods, even when faced with resistance from colleagues, parents, or school policies that emphasise rote learning and exam results. Their intrinsic motivation and emotional investment in students fuel their efforts to create engaging and meaningful classrooms. This includes adapting teaching strategies to accommodate proficiency levels, acknowledging student diversity, and balancing traditional and innovative methods. However, pressures from initiatives like GUNOTSAV and entrenched examination culture sometimes limit teachers' ability to fully implement autonomy-supportive approaches. Teachers' reflections on online versus offline learning reveal concerns about the quality of motivation and engagement when external controls dominate.

Conclusion

The findings highlight that while teachers in SEBA and CBSE schools of Guwahati are motivated, they differ in the extent to which they provide an autonomy-supporting environment. Addressing curricular and systemic limitations, alongside sustained support and encouragement from school authorities, including curricular revisions, pedagogical flexibility, and improved instructional resources, are essential for fostering a more student-friendly and autonomy-supportive educational environment.

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