

The Role of Emotion in Learning English as a Foreign Language at Jordanian Universities

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Abstract

As emotions play a major role in the process of learning a foreign language, it becomes important to know how they influence the learners' motivation, enthusiasm, and attitude in acquiring a new language. The main objective of this study is to explore the effect of emotion on the process of learning a foreign language among some Jordanian university students majoring in English. This was a cross sectional study using a survey of modified Beliefs About Language Learning Inventory (BALLI) questionnaire. The target population was first-year Jadara University students learning English as a foreign language. Answers to the survey questions were analyzed using SPSS software. The role of emotional factors in learning a second language was obvious. A majority reported being slightly to strongly motivated to learn English. Nevertheless, seventy-three percent of the participants indicated that they experienced anxiety and fear while learning English. That is why eighty-six percent of the participants demanded that English language instructors and curriculum designers of English programs in academic institutions consider positive emotional factors (like eagerness, reward and pleasantness) in teaching English as a foreign language.

Keywords: *Anxiety, Emotion, English as a foreign language, Jadara University, Jordan, Motivation.*

Introduction

According to recent research (Tyng et al. 2017; Kaiqi et al. 2020; Zheng and Zhou 2022; Plonsky et al. 2022; Al-Jarrah 2024), emotions play an important role in different aspects of language learning, including memory, motivation and communication. Alshdaifat (2021) also underscores the role of emotions in the semantic analysis of some vocabulary. From a linguistic point of view, gaining information about how emotions affect the process of foreign language acquisition (FLA) can provide a valuable and important understanding of the cognitive and emotional mechanisms that play a role in learning a new language (Esfandiari et al. 2021).

Indeed, foreign language learning (FLL) is often a complex process and an emotionally challenging experience for many, especially new, learners. Emotions influence motivation, self-confidence, self-perception, and the overall success of the journey. Many factors show how emotions are connected with and related to FLL. These factors include the followings:

Motivation: Emotions such as eagerness, happiness, joy, pleasantness, and inquisitiveness connected with a new cultural experience can affect and drive the learning process of a second language. Conversely, adverse emotions like tedium or frustration and nervousness can limit motivation and detract from the enjoyment of the learning process and involvement in it (Gardner and Lambert 1959; Anjomshoa and Sadighi 2015; Zareian and Jodaei 2015).

Anxiety: Anxiety is a feeling of unease or fear commonly experienced by language learners, often resulting from the fear of making errors, being shy, concern about external judgment, or feelings of embarrassment. This anxiety can affect many aspects of learning-language skills including both speaking and listening skills and can hinder active participation in language-related activities, like participation in lecture room halls or public discussions. (Plonsky et al. 2022) Anxiety, according to different sources like Ganschow and Sparks (1996), Ali and Anwar (2021), and Plonsky et al. (2022) can significantly affect the whole process of foreign language learning in different

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areas: Impaired cognitive functioning, reduced memory performance (Zareian and Jodaei 2015; Tyng et al. 2017). Fear of negative evaluation, perfectionistic tendencies, communication apprehension, negative impact on motivation, and the appearance of some physical symptoms such as increased heart rate, stuttering, sweating, and nervousness, all these can negatively interfere with the learning process of foreign language.

To overcome the impact of anxiety on foreign language learning, it is important for educators and learners to adopt new strategies that promote a positive and supportive learning environment. These strategies may include setting realistic and achievable goals, creating a safe and encouraging learning environment, seeking social support, practicing breathing exercises, and relaxation techniques. In addition to this, instructors can play an important role in fostering a positive and inclusive learning environment in order to minimize anxiety and promote the desire to learn (Plonsky et al. 2022).

Other factors related to emotions in FLL include social interaction, feeling of happiness and fulfillment, cultural identity and dread of judgment (Alamer 2023). On the positive side, constructive emotions can create a desired cycle of reinforcement and feedback as well as a desire to continue learning and progressing. Moreover, positive emotions, such as interest, curiosity, and enthusiasm, can enhance memory retention. When learners are emotionally engaged with the material, they are more likely to remember and recall information. Cultural and social emotions, such as a sense of belonging or cultural identity, can also positively influence language learning. Incorporating humor and enjoyable activities in language learning can create positive emotional experiences. Humorous situations and enjoyable tasks are more likely to be remembered, contributing to a positive learning experience. (Reigel 2008; Ali and Anwar 2022).

In order to counter low motivation among students, Abdul Rahman (2017) recommends helping learners to connect the language to their personal interests, goals, skills, or real-life situations, setting achievable goals, establishing a positive environment, acknowledging even small achievements, incorporating different learning approaches, and providing support and guidance whenever needed.

In summary, emotions play a crucial role in shaping memory processes in foreign language learning. Positive emotions, motivation, and personal relevance can enhance memory retention, while negative emotions and stress can impede the encoding and retrieval of information. Creating a positive and emotionally supportive learning environment can contribute to more effective language acquisition (Kaiqi et al. 2020; Lindquist 2021).

Some research on emotions and their impact on language learning investigated the role of anxiety, self-confidence, interest, and involvement (Boudreau, 2018). Other studies investigated the relationship between language skills, emotional factors, learning strategies, language proficiency, lecture room hall dynamics, and language learning strategies (Zafari and Biriab 2014). Additionally, works examined the impact of different instructional ways and approaches, the promotion of positive emotional experiences, and learners' motivation (Savekar et al. 2021). Therefore, educational institutions like schools and universities as well as instructors can play an important role in shaping the emotional experiences of language learners. They can help in providing a supportive environment, introducing emotion regulation strategies to manage students' anxiety and stress (Lin 2022), incorporating engaging and interactive activities (like role playing and group discussions) that trigger positive emotions, and providing constructive feedback by acknowledging students' progress to boost self-confidence and motivation (Faulconer et al. 2021).

The present paper explores the effect of emotion in foreign language learning among first-year Jadara University students and the factors that influence the learning of English as a foreign language. It seeks to answer the following two questions:

- 1- What is the impact of emotions on foreign language learning (FLL) and the acquisition of English?
 - 2- Are there any strategies that address anxiety among first-year students at Jadara university/English Language and Translation department
2. Literature Review

Arabic-speaking students face specific challenges when learning English as a foreign language. These challenges, which may arouse negative emotions on the part of Arabic speakers, arise due to differences between Arabic and English in linguistic structure, writing systems, and cultural aspects. These differences include the Alphabet used by each language, the sound systems, verb tenses, articles, and prepositions, polysemous and synonymous words, cultural values, sentence structure, and others (Brown 2000; Rabab'ah 2005; Ansari 2012; Elttayef 2017).

Traditional and old linguistic theories have mainly focused on cognitive and linguistic factors. Recently, however, it was found that research on the role of emotion in FLL may have implications for learning theories (Lu, 2022). Moreover, Kaiki et al. (2020) maintain that research on emotion in FLL necessitates a new theoretical framework that considers both cognitive and affective dimensions. The affective filter hypothesis, proposed by Krashen (2003) and proven by Lin (2008), suggests that emotional factors, including anxiety, can create a mental challenge and barriers that impede language acquisition. This hypothesis has paved the way for further research about the role of emotions in foreign language learning. Recent theoretical frameworks, such as the socio-cognitive approach, focused on the importance of emotions in language learning.

A study by Dewaele and MacIntyre (2016) investigated various theoretical frameworks proposed in order to understand the relationship between emotions and language learning. The authors examined the impact of emotions on language learners' motivation and language performance. The study also discussed the influence of instructors, lecture room hall environment, and cultural factors on emotions in foreign language learning. Through their analysis, the authors underscored the significance of acknowledging and addressing emotions in language learning contexts.

One basic concept is that emotions can enhance memory consolidation. Earlier studies, such as the one by Cahill and McGaugh (1995:412), have shown that “emotionally charged events are better remembered and long lasting. This principle can be applied to language learning, where emotionally engaging content might lead to better retention of vocabulary and grammar”.

Emotion and memory consolidation are also closely linked in the second language learning process. The emotional experiences connected to language acquisition can significantly influence the formation and recall of memories linked with the new language. This link highlights the relationship between emotion and memory consolidation in the context of learning second language. When learners experience emotions during language learning, whether they be positive or negative, these emotions can affect the process in which information is processed and stored in memory (Talmi 2013). Moreover, Barton et al. (2020) state, ‘When learners are emotionally engaged with the L2 content, they are more likely to concentrate on it. This kind of focus can lead to better encoding of linguistic information, such as vocabulary, grammar rules, and pronunciation (p. 435). When learners have emotionally engaging experiences in the context of L2 learning, such as meaningful conversations, memorable cultural interactions, or emotionally rich contents, the information is more likely to be retained (Adolphs 2009).

Different strategies have been suggested to help improve attention and focus during language learning including the following: setting clear goals, creating a structured study plan, breaking down learning session into shorter intervals (The Pomodoro Techniques by Oleh Kinso 2020), getting everybody involved, utilizing technology and staying positive (Adolphs 2009).

It is important to acknowledge also that emotional challenges, such as anxiety, can negatively affect memory encoding in L2 learning. “Negative emotions, especially anxiety, have the potential to disrupt cognitive processes and hinder memory formation” (Good et al. 2015:635). Learners facing heightened anxiety in language learning may face difficulties in both retaining and recalling language content. Conversely, emotional contexts, such as story-telling, songs, or cultural experiences, can provide a powerful framework for memory encoding in FLL (Good et al. 2015). Learners are more likely to remember language contents that are connected or embedded in emotionally engaging narratives or activities.

Research in psycholinguistics by Schacht and Sommer (2009) has explored how emotional content in language affects processing. It has been shown that emotionally charged words or phrases that have significant emotional loads “are processed more deeply and quickly” (p. 645). This suggests that emotionally engaging language contexts might enhance language acquisition.

Research has also shown that emotion and language processing are closely related, as emotions can have a significant effect on how we understand, produce, use, and communicate in language. When we are in a particular emotional condition, we may be more likely to interpret and perceive the language contents in a way that is in line with our emotional state (Out et al. 2020). For example, someone in a positive mood might interpret ambiguous language as more positive or optimistic.

Language is also a primary tool for expressing emotions. People use words, tone of voice, and body language to convey their emotional states. Understanding the emotional expressions of others is an essential aspect of language processing. By incorporating emotional expression into foreign language learning, educators can create a more engaging and meaningful learning experience. This emotional connection can positively impact motivation, retention, and overall language proficiency. In general, people are skilled at recognizing emotions in the voices of others. Whether it is a happy, sad, angry, or neutral tone, our ability to interpret emotional cues in speech contributes to effective communication. (Neves 2021). Nowadays, emotion recognition in speech is a field within natural language processing (NLP) and artificial intelligence (AI) that focuses on identifying and analyzing the emotional content conveyed in spoken language. This technology has applications in various domains, including customer service, human-computer interaction, mental health monitoring, and sentiment analysis.

Previous research studies have examined the role of anxiety in second language learning. For instance, Oteir (2019) found that “language anxiety can negatively influence language learning, with anxious learners often performing worse on language tasks” (p. 315). Reducing anxiety through various ways and techniques helps promote language learning. Increasing learners’ motivation is essential. Motivation refers to the internal or external factors that drive individuals to pursue a particular goal or engage in a specific behavior or context. In the context of learning a second language, motivation can be categorized into two main types:

- a. **Intrinsic Motivation:** This occurs when individuals are motivated by their personal interest, attention, curiosity, and satisfaction in the ways of acquiring a new language. Intrinsic motivation typically results in more effective and long-lasting language learning, as learners are primarily engaged and interested (Mehmet, 2020).
- b. **Extrinsic motivation** comes from external rewards or pressures, such as grades, job requirements, or social recognition. While extrinsic motivation can initially encourage language learning, it may not be as effective in the end if intrinsic motivation is lacking.

Motivation and Emotion: Motivation is closely linked to emotion in language learning. Gardner's socio-educational model established in (1985), according to Derin (2010) emphasizes the role of integrative motivation, which involves positive attitudes toward the culture associated with the target language. Positive emotions linked to cultural interest can drive motivation and, consequently, language learning success. For its part, positive psychology, a field that focuses on the study and cultivation of positive emotions, strengths, and well-being, can have a significant impact on language learning. Incorporating positive psychology principles into language learning environments can enhance motivation, engagement, and overall learning outcomes. Research, such as that conducted by Seligman et al. (2005:415), suggests that “nurturing positive emotions can improve learning outcomes, including language acquisition”. However, consulting educational and clinical psychologists in the Jordanian culture is not often practised.

Cultural and social factors play an important role in the process of learning a foreign language. The emotional influence of language learning is different across cultures in the world. Cultural norms and expectations can affect emotional responses to language learning situations. However, these emotional responses in Arabic culture are not well investigated. Studies in this field have examined cultural differences in language anxiety and

emotional context during language learning (Rosenqvist et al. 2014). The results of these studies showed that FLL is influenced by a complex interplay of cultural and social factors. These factors can significantly influence the learner's motivation, understanding, opportunities, and ways and strategies for language acquisition. Understanding and addressing the cultural and social factors in foreign language learning contribute to a more holistic and successful language acquisition experience. Language learners benefit not only from linguistic competence but also from the ability to navigate and communicate effectively in diverse cultural contexts.

Cultural attitudes toward language learning and bilingualism can vary widely. In some cultures, people tend not to correct mistakes made by new language learners and consider this as an insult. Moreover, in some cultures, multilingualism is highly valued and encouraged, while in others, there may be resistance to learning other languages or a preference for a dominant native language. This mostly happened because some people in certain cultures do not need to learn a second language especially if they live in small communities.

Method

The study adopted the survey research design to obtain data. Thus, 145 surveys were sent to participants through emails and Whats App messages. We received 125 responses, forming a response rate of 95.1 %. Twenty-five surveys were excluded because the respondents' age was way above the average age (19 years) of participants. The survey was conducted between August and November 2023 and targeted first-year students majoring in English and Translation at Jadara University, Jordan. First-year students were chosen to be the sample of the study because they usually undergo emotional changes when they move from high school to college, where they encounter new methods of teaching and a different social environment.

The survey consisted of the following elements: Demographics, language learning experience, role of emotional factors in FLL, emotion regulation strategies, language context and emotion, and reflections on emotion and language. The last question was an open-ended one designed to elicit participants' opinions about their experience in learning English as a foreign language.

According to statistics from the Ministry of Higher Education of Jordan, the total number of students at Jadara University during the academic year 2022-2023 was about 5000. Those enrolled in the Department of English and Translation was 476 (<https://www.admhec.gov.jo/mjr2017/UnivMajorCapacity.aspx>). First-year students were 145 and were all included in the survey. The study used the modified Beliefs About Language Learning Inventory (BALLI) survey (Horwitz 1988). To gauge participants' emotional encounters during the FLL process, a comprehensive self-report questionnaire has been developed. It has multiple choice questions, aimed at capturing the intensity, frequency, and characteristics of emotions experienced during foreign language learning.

For ethical reasons, a prior written approval was sought from participants. Following data collection, descriptive statistics were made to analyze the results of the study. The quantitative data collected through surveys were analyzed using SPSS software. These analytical methods allowed for the exploration of relationships between emotions and language proficiency.

Findings

This section analyzes quantitatively students' responses to the ten questions of the survey. In Table (1), we find the percentages of responses distributed among 100 participants to the question: How long have you been actively learning English as a foreign language? The results shows that 62% of the participants have been actively learning English as a foreign language for five or more years. More than 38% have been learning English as a second language for 5 years or less. The word "actively" in the question brought our attention to the fact that 'active' means that the students sought personal methods, besides schools' ones, to learn and understand English. In primary and early secondary schools, many students in Jordan do not perceive the importance of learning English.

Table 1: How long have you been actively learning English as a foreign language?

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Less than 1 year	8.00%	8
1-2 years	8.00%	8
2-5 years	22.00%	22
More than 5 years	62.00%	62
TOTAL		100

Regarding the question related to the degree of motivation (1-10), results showed that the motivation rate was 6.73/10. Although, this result is somewhat above average (5.5/10), it raises the concern that a good number of students (30 out of 100) join the English Department and are either somewhat or very slightly motivated to learn English. As we see in the table, only 44 are well-motivated while 26 are moderately motivated.

Table 2: Degree of motivation to learn English

					6	8		T O T A L	W E I G H T E D A V E R A G E
					1	1		1	6
					1	7		0	.
					.	.		0	7
					8	8		%	3
					8	2			
					%	%			
					1	1		1	
					2	8		0	
								0	

In question 3, the students were asked to answer by 'yes' or 'no' if they were motivated to learn English as a foreign language. As we see, 62 answered 'yes', while 38 of them indicated that they were not motivated to learn English. This result further confirms findings in the second question above.

Table 3: Are you motivated to learn English as a foreign language?

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Yes	62%	62
No	38%	38
TOTAL		100

The fourth question was: Have you ever experienced anxiety or nervousness when learning or using English in real-life situations? The results showed that 73% of respondents experienced a high to moderate level of anxiety, while 27% had little or slight anxiety, Table 4 below illustrates this.

Table 4: Levels of anxiety (1-10) among participants

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	TOTAL	WEIGHTED AVERAGE
★ □	2% 2	5% 5	6% 6	7% 7	11% 11	12% 12	14% 14	17% 17	7% 7	19% 19	100	6.73

When directly asked to answer by 'yes' or 'no' if they indeed experienced anxiety when learning English as a foreign language, 73% of the participants answered 'yes' and 27% said 'no'. This result also corresponds with findings in question 4 above. The results are shown in Table 5.

Table 5: Have you experienced anxiety when learning English as a foreign language?

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Yes	73%	74
No	27%	27
TOTAL		100

The sixth question asked the students to answer by 'yes' or 'no' if anxiety affects their learning of English as a foreign language. Results in Table 6 show that 83% believe that anxiety does affect their learning, while only 17% indicate that it does not. This clearly shows that anxiety poses a big problem in learning English in Jordan.

Table 6: Does anxiety affect your learning of English as a foreign language?

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Yes	83%	84
No	17%	17
TOTAL		100

The students were then asked the following question to be answered by 'yes' or 'no': Does your language learning progress positively differ when feeling confident versus not feeling so? The results show that the majority (70%) of them agree that their performance is positively different when feeling confident, while the rest (30%) answered by 'no'.

Table 7: Does feeling confident and not anxious help your English language?

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Yes	70%	71
No	30%	30
TOTAL		100

The next question was about managing negative emotions: Do you consciously use strategies to manage or alleviate negative emotions during language learning? The results show that 62% do use strategies to manage negative emotions during learning language, while over a third (38%) do not.

Table 8: Do you use strategies to manage negative emotion during English language learning?

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
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Yes	62%	63
No	38%	39
TOTAL		100

Table 9: Do you believe these emotion regulation strategies enhance your language learning experience?

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Yes	83%	83
No	17%	17
TOTAL		100

The ninth question was the following: Do you believe these emotion regulation strategies enhance your language learning experience? The results show that the great majority (83%) believe that these emotion regulations strategies enhance the language learning experience, while only 17% say that they do not. It is worth mentioning that 58% of the participants gave examples of these strategies, which were mostly personal and individualized plans.

The students were finally asked if language instructors and curriculum designers should consider emotional factors when planning language learning programs? The results showed that 86% answered by 'yes', while only 14% said 'no'.

Table 10: Should language instructors and curriculum designers consider emotional factors when planning language learning programs?

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Yes	86%	86
No	14%	14
TOTAL		100

Discussion

In this paper, we have explored the intricate relationship between emotions and the acquisition of English as a foreign language among some Jordanian university students. The survey used to carry out the study shows that emotions exert a multifaceted influence on second language learning. In addition to findings by previous studies included in the literature review above, the analysis further confirms the negative impact of anxiety, the benefits of motivation and students feeling confident, and the importance of addressing emotional dimensions in language pedagogy.

The findings of the present study on the role of emotion in FLL agree with those by other scholars such as Lu (2022) on the implications of emotion on theoretical framework in language learning, Kaiki et al. (2020) on the necessity of a new theoretical framework that considers both cognitive and affective dimensions, and Lin (2008), who suggests that emotional factors, including anxiety, can create a mental challenge and barriers that impede language acquisition.

Motivation, inherently linked with emotions, stands out as a crucial element in foreign language learning. Positive emotional experiences, such as cultural fascination or a sense of achievement, can energize learners, nurturing their perseverance and dedication to language acquisition. In our study, about two-thirds of the students were found to be motivated or strongly motivated to learn English as a foreign language. This is consistent with findings by Neves (2021), Mehmet (2020) and Derin (2010) on the significance of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation in FLL. In contrast, negative motivation involving frustration, tediousness, and cultural barriers lead to a low level of motivation as found in other studies like Gardner (1959), Anjomshoa and Sadighi (2015), and Zareian and Jodaei (2015).

Therefore, instructors should make it a priority to establish an environment that enhances positive emotions, and to recognize that motivated students tend to achieve a more significant progress. Emotions are indeed powerful drivers for learning a foreign language. The interplay of positive emotions, motivation, curiosity, and enjoyable experiences can create a positive learning environment, while addressing negative emotions like fear and anxiety is crucial for overcoming challenges. Recognizing and harnessing the emotional aspects of language learning can lead to a more fulfilling and effective language acquisition process.

Language anxiety, widespread among students who learn a foreign language, can stop learners or slow their performance, communication, and willingness to be part of language learning activities (Lababidi, 2016). In our case, 73% of respondents indicated a certain level of anxiety when learning English as a foreign language, and 84% recognized that anxiety affected their learning and performance. See Oteir (2019) Ali and Anwar (2021), and Plonsky et al. (2022) for similar findings regarding the negative role of anxiety. Implementing certain

strategies to alleviate anxiety and manage stress management was done by most students. However, we need to keep in mind that learning a new language is a gradual process, and everyone progresses at their own pace. By implementing stress management techniques and maintaining a positive attitude, one can enhance the effectiveness and enjoyment of learning English as a foreign language (Seligman et al. 2005).

This leads us to the importance of teaching emotion regulation strategies to language students and new learners. “Techniques such as mindfulness, positive self-talk, and relaxation exercises can provide learners with tools to effectively manage negative emotions” (Grzybowski 2022:83). By incorporating these strategies into language instruction, educators and policy makers can contribute to creating more positive and emotionally supportive learning settings and environment. Indeed, many subjects in our sample mentioned that they developed personal strategies to overcome or manage negative emotions such as anxiety and lack of motivation. This, in turn, underscores the need for discussions with instructors and curriculum designers to consider and implement these strategies in FLL. In line with our study’s implications, a study by Lopez (2013) found Mexican students were able to transform negative emotions such as fear, anger, and frustration towards teachers' written feedback and evaluations into positive energy after reflecting on their moral obligations as students to their families. Moreover, a study conducted by Swain (2013:12) demonstrated that “learners' embarrassment can act as a strong motivator for them to acquire the L2 to avoid such feelings in front of peers”

Conclusions and Recommendations

The relationship between emotion and second language learning has been found to be intricate and dynamic. This paper has shed more light on the significant role that emotions play in shaping the language-learning journey, emphasizing both the positive and negative aspects of emotional experiences. Among emotional elements, it focused on the role low motivation and anxiety play in hindering FLL. Therefore, educators, researchers, and policymakers in education should consider the emotional dimension of language learning, employing evidence-based strategies to improve the power of positive emotions and minimize the impact of negative ones. The field of emotion in language learning presents a golden opportunity for further research and exploration, with the aim to transforming language education into an enriching and emotionally rewarding experience for all learners.

Language is an acquired skill that is learned within a cultural and emotional context, which means that we cannot explore human language without also studying culture and emotion. Therefore, if we want to fully understand the connection between language and emotion and culture, we need further studies to understand how they interact together and affect one another. Understanding the deep connection between language and cultural norms is essential for appreciating the role language plays in the cohesion and continuity of societies.

Most of the participants in our study mentioned that there were no strategies that consider the effect of emotion when learning English as a foreign language. Therefore, it is recommended that policy makers, who are in charge of English language study plans, take into consideration this factor especially that anxiety is a major influencing factor. In addition, the motivation rate to learn English as a foreign language was not high enough (around 6.7 out of 10). This might lead us to think that many students in the English department at Jadara University, Jordan, did not opt to study English based on their motivation rate but rather for social (prestige) and economic (good job offer) reasons. Therefore, it is recommended to carry out specific studies to further investigate motivation and the factors that make students choose to major in English at the university.

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