

Investigating Expectancy and Value in Learning ESL

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Abstract

This quantitative study investigates language learning strategies among undergraduates, utilizing a purposive sample of 132 participants of undergraduate students in Malaysia. The survey comprises three sections: A, focusing on demographic profiles; B, exploring value components through intrinsic goal orientation, extrinsic goal orientation, and task value beliefs; and C, assessing expectancy components, including students' perception of self-efficacy and control beliefs for learning. In terms of value components, participants highly value intrinsic goal orientation, emphasizing the preference for challenging coursework and the satisfaction derived from understanding course content. Extrinsic goal orientation highlights a strong emphasis on achieving good grades, while task value beliefs underscore the perceived relevance and importance of course materials. Regarding expectancy components, students express confidence in receiving excellent grades and mastering complex materials, indicating a positive perception of self-efficacy. Control beliefs for learning indicate a belief in the influence of strategic studying and hard work on their academic success. These findings provide valuable insights into the motivational aspects of ESL learning among undergraduates, offering implications for educational strategies and interventions to enhance language acquisition.

Keywords: Learning Motivation, Learning Strategies, Value Components, Expectancy Components

Introduction

Background of Study

Learning a language is a difficult task that requires unwavering determination, motivation, and persistent work (Lou and Noels, 2020). The significance of motivation in second language

acquisition cannot be understated. For several individuals learning a second language, the lack of consistent language immersion or opportunities to contact native speakers presents an immense obstacle. Under such conditions, motivation becomes the crucial factor that maintains their progress in learning, driving them forward even in the absence of optimal learning settings. It acts as the primary motivator for learners' dedication to becoming proficient in the language, making up for the absence of immersive experiences and aiding their advancement toward mastery (Wu, 2022).

The expectancy-value theory is a psychological framework that aims to explain individual motivation and behaviour, offering useful insights into this phenomenon. Studying the expectancy-value theory among Malaysian undergraduate students offers a distinct chance to examine the motivating variables and academic behaviors in a particular cultural setting. Malaysian undergraduate students, similar to students in other places, face a range of motivating obstacles, such as academic stress, anxiety about failing, and the difficulty of balancing academic obligations with extracurricular activities or part-time jobs. Gaining insight into the intersection of anticipation and value judgements with these difficulties can facilitate the development of successful intervention techniques.

Statement of Problem

Although the importance of language learning strategies in helping undergraduate students acquire language skills is acknowledged, there is a lack of research regarding the motivational factors that influence the use of these methods in Malaysia. Wang and Xue (2022) emphasised the need for additional study to clarify the complex relationships among motivation, persistence, and academic accomplishment. This study highlights the possibility of conducting further research in this field to gain a better understanding of how motivation affects students' determination in academic endeavours and, ultimately, their levels of success.

Therefore, this study aims to address this gap by examining the motivational factors that influence language learning practices among undergraduate students in Malaysia. The objective is to examine the interaction between different elements of value (intrinsic goal orientation, extrinsic goal orientation, and task value beliefs) and expectancy (self-efficacy and control beliefs) to understand effective strategies and interventions that can improve language acquisition outcomes in this group. This project aims to significantly improve language learning experiences and outcomes for Malaysian undergraduate students by highlighting the importance and usefulness of understanding motivational dynamics.

By identifying and understanding the motivational factors that significantly influence language acquisition among Malaysian undergraduate students, educators and policymakers can tailor interventions and instructional approaches that resonate with the unique needs and motivations of learners. This insight not only enhances language learning outcomes but also contributes to the overall improvement of educational practices and policies aimed at fostering a more supportive and conducive learning environment. Thus, this study not only addresses an immediate research gap but also carries the potential to inform broader educational strategies and initiatives geared towards enhancing language education in Malaysia and beyond.

Objective of the Study and Research Questions

- How do learners perceive Value components in the learning of ESL?
- How do learners perceive Expectancy components in the learning of ESL?

Literature Review

Language Learning Strategies (Value, Expectancy)

Students's language learning strategies are affected by their learning motivation which includes expectancy and value components. Expectancy for success is an individual's beliefs about their ability to achieve in different learning tasks, which is a multidimensional construct related to ability beliefs or academic self-concept (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002). This concept reflects students' perceptions of their academic competence, whereas self-efficacy emphasizes believed outcomes of specific actions. However, according to Loh (2019), research indicates a decline in expectancy for success across school years, leading to decreased subjective task values. This decline is due to more challenging learning content, better interpretation of feedback, and social comparisons among peers. Students, especially those who are struggling, may underestimate task values to protect their self-esteem and show greater interest in areas where they have achieved success. Although expectancy may decline over time, its cumulative effects alongside value beliefs may strengthen, leading to stability of expectancy in late adolescence, particularly when students can choose their majors or electives based on their past performance (Loh, 2019). On the other hand, subjective task values are defined as the motivation for choosing to engage in a task, operationalized as enjoyment or intrinsic motivation (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002). They are divided into four facets: attainment value which is the importance placed on performing well in a task, closely linked to personal goals such as mastery and performance goals; intrinsic value which is the enjoyment and personal satisfaction derived from engaging in a task or activity, highlighting the learner's subjective interest; utility value which is the perceived usefulness of a task or domain in achieving current and future goals, including career aspirations; and cost which is the negative aspects associated with undertaking a task, including the spending of time, effort, and emotional energy (e.g., stress, anxiety, fear of failure or success), as well as opportunity costs which are the benefits missed by not choosing alternative activities (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002; Loh, 2019).

Hoi (2022) highlights that research in second language (L2) learning education supports the idea that expectancy and value beliefs not only independently but also collectively enhance students' use of deep language learning strategies. These beliefs have been linked to various aspects of L2 engagement, including the use of cognitive engagement strategies, willingness to communicate, and persistence in language studies. He highlights the key factors of classroom environment that shape students' expectancy and task value beliefs which are quality of instruction- effective, relevant, and supportive instruction boosts students' confidence and value attachment to the learning process; social support- encouragement from peers and clear learning guidelines from teachers enhance students' motivational beliefs; and classroom conditions- engaging in meaningful activities, experiencing success in appropriately challenging tasks, and learning in a supportive environment positively impact students' motivational beliefs.

Past Studies on Learning Strategies

Many studies have been conducted to investigate expectancy and value components in learning English as a second language. For instance, the study by Saleh et al (2022)

investigated students' value components' effect on learning motivation, students' expectancy components' effect on learning motivation, and the relationship between the two variables in learning motivation. 151 students from a public university were involved in the quantitative study by responding to an online survey which was adapted from Pintrich & De Groot (1990). Three main findings were reported: value components received positive responses from the respondents, expectancy components received positive responses from the respondents (value components received a higher mean score compared to expectancy components), and a strong positive relationship between value and expectancy components based on correlation analysis. The study also proposed that educators consider value and expectancy components in order to enhance students' learning motivation.

Another study by Hoi (2022) investigated the relationship between students' expectancy and task value belief, students' perception of classroom conditions: classroom structure, teaching relevance, and peer support, and students' engagement in an instructed second language learning class. 413 students from English as a foreign language course in Vietnam were involved in the study whereby the participants answered the questionnaire to be analysed using structural equation modelling. The main findings reported were: teaching relevance and peer support were found to significantly predict students' expectancy and task value beliefs, subsequently enhancing all dimensions of student engagement, classroom structure did not significantly affect students' expectancy value belief or their engagement, the impact of teaching relevance on expectancy belief was notably significant and stronger for students with higher English proficiency, and peer support was found to predict task value belief more strongly among students majoring in English than those not majoring in English. The study also highlighted the importance of tailoring L2 instruction to meet the diverse needs of students, the need for differentiated instructional approaches that consider students' proficiency levels and academic majors to enhance engagement in L2 learning, and proposed that educators focus on creating engaging and relevant teaching strategies and on building a classroom culture that promotes positive peer interactions.

Conceptual Framework

Figure 1 presents a conceptual framework for studying ESL learning strategies, categorizing them into two main types: values and expectancy. Values include intrinsic goals, emphasizing the joy of learning, and extrinsic goals, focused on external rewards like grades or college admission. Task value, a part of values, influences learners' motivation, engagement, and success in acquiring English by reflecting the perceived importance, interest, and usefulness of a task. The framework also considers expectancy, highlighting students' self-efficacy, their belief in their task performance abilities. High self-efficacy is linked to increased use of diverse learning strategies and persistence in overcoming ESL learning challenges. The figure further notes the impact of students' control beliefs, where a sense of control leads to the adoption of varied learning strategies and active learning engagement.

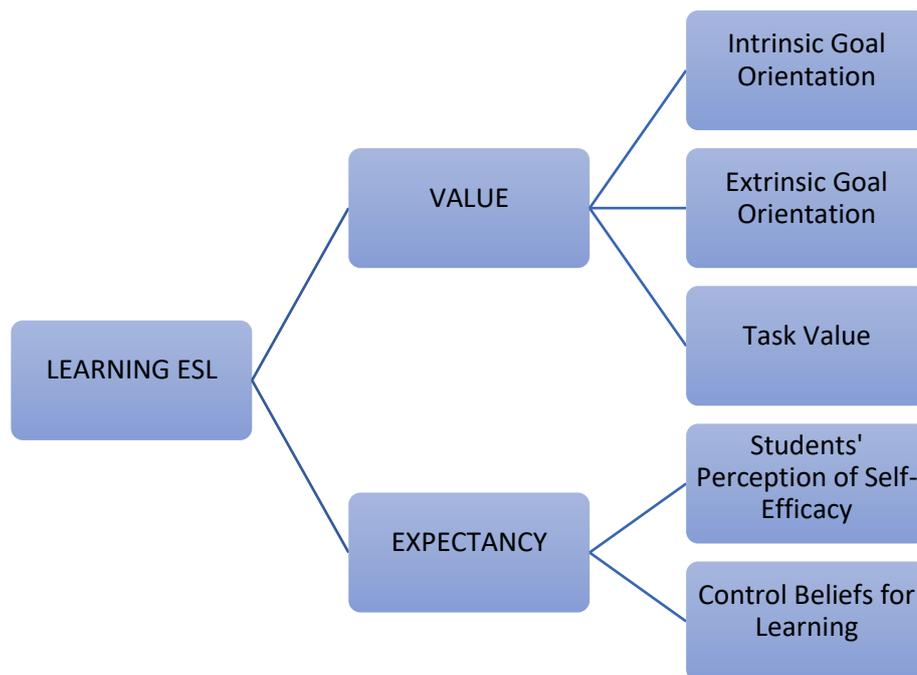


Figure 1- Conceptual Framework of the Study
ESL Learning Strategies

Methodology

This quantitative study is done to explore language learning strategies among undergraduates. A purposive sample of 132 participants responded to the survey. The instrument used is a 5 Likert-scale survey and is rooted from Pintrich & De Groot (1990) to reveal the variables in table 1 below. The survey has 3 sections. Section A has 1 item on demographic profile. Section B has 12 items on value components. Section C has 7 items on expectancy components.

Table 1
Distribution of Items in the Survey
Pintrich & De Groot (1990)

SECT	CONSTRUCT		VARIABLE	No Of Items	Total Items
B	VALUE COMPONENTS	(a)	Intrinsic Goal Orientation	4	12
		(b)	Extrinsic Goal Orientation	3	
		(c)	Task Value Beliefs	5	
C	EXPECTANCY COMPONENT	(a)	Students' Perception of Self-Efficacy	5	7
		(b)	Control Beliefs for Learning	2	
	TOTAL NO OF ITEMS				19

Table 2

Reliability of Survey

Reliability Statistics	
Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
.952	19

Table 2 shows the reliability of the survey. The analysis shows a Cronbach alpha of .952, thus, revealing a good reliability of the instrument chosen/used. Further analysis using SPSS is done to present findings to answer the research questions for this study.

Findings

Findings for Demographic Profile

Q1. Gender

Table 3

Percentage for Gender

1	Male	47%
2	Female	53%

The data from the survey indicates a nearly equal distribution of respondents across genders. Specifically, 47% of participants self-identified as male, while 53% identified as female, as detailed in Table 3.

Findings for Value Components

This section presents data to answer research question 1- How do learners perceive Value components in the learning of ESL? In the context of this study, value components are measured by (i) intrinsic goal orientation, (ii) extrinsic goal orientation and (iii) task value beliefs.

Value Component

Intrinsic Goal Orientation (4 items)

Table 4

Mean for Intrinsic Goal orientation

		Mean
1	MSVCQ1 In this program, I prefer class work that is challenging so I can learn new things.	3.6
2	MSVCQ2 In the courses of a program like this, I prefer course materials that arouse my curiosity, even if they are difficult to learn.	3.7
3	MSVCQ 3 The most satisfying thing for me in this program is trying to understand the content of the courses	3.9
4	MSVCQ 4 When I have the opportunity in this class, I choose course assignments that I can learn from even if they don't guarantee a good grade.	3.7

Table 4 displays the mean scores for intrinsic goal orientation, a component of value in ESL learning. The four items used to measure intrinsic goal orientation all have mean scores above 3.6, suggesting that on average, participants highly value the opportunity to learn new things, tackle challenging material, and find course content intrinsically interesting. Item 3, has the highest mean score at 3.9, indicating that understanding course content is particularly valued by participants.

(a) EXTRINSIC GOAL ORIENTATION (3 items)

Table 5

Mean for Extrinsic Orientation

		Mean
1	MSEGQ1 Getting a good grade in the classes is the most satisfying thing for me right now.	4.4
2	MSEGQ 2 The most important thing for me right now is improving my overall grade point average, so my main concern in this program is getting a good grade.	4.4
3	MSEGQ 3 I want to do well in the classes because it is important to show my ability to my family, friends, or others.	4.3

Table 5 displays the mean scores for the three items that make up extrinsic goal orientation. This type of orientation is characterized by valuing learning English for external rewards, such as good grades or acknowledgement by others. The item with the highest mean score is at 4.4 for both items 1 and 2. This suggests that, among extrinsic factors, good grades are particularly important to the participants.

(b) TASK VALUE BELIEFS (5 items)

Table 6

Mean for Task Value Beliefs

		Mean
1	MSTVQ1 I think I will be able to transfer what I learn from one course to other courses in this program.	3.6
2	MSTVQ2 It is important for me to learn the course materials in the courses.	4
3	MSTVQ3 I think the course material in the courses of this program is useful for me to learn	4
4	MSTVQ4 I like the subject matter of the courses.	3.9
5	MSTVQ5 Understanding the subject matter of the courses is very important to me.	4.1

Table 6 reveals that students in the ESL learning program value the tasks and activities they engage in. With mean scores between 3.6 and 4.1, participants see these elements as transferable, useful, interesting, and personally important. This high perceived value, likely bolstered by the focus on course material relevance and understanding, could fuel their motivation and success in the program.

Findings for Expectancy Components

This section presents data to answer research question 2- How do learners perceive Expectancy components in the learning of ESL? In the context of this study, expectancy components are measured (i) students’ perception of self-efficacy and (ii) control beliefs for learning.

Expectancy Component- 7 items

Students’ Perception of Self-Efficacy (5 items)

Table 7

Mean for Students’ perception of Self-Efficacy

		Mean
1	ECSEQ1I believe I will receive excellent grades in the classes.	3.7
2	ECSEQ2I'm confident I can understand the most complex materials presented by the instructors in the courses.	3.5
3	ECSEQ3I'm confident I can do an excellent job on the assignments and tests in this program.	3.6
4	ECSEQ4I'm certain I can master the skills being taught in the classes.	3.6
5	ECSEQ5Considering the difficulty of the courses, the teachers, and my skills, I think I will do well in the classes.	3.7

Table 7 summarizes the mean scores for students' self-efficacy beliefs about their English language learning. The mean scores range from 3.5 to 3.7. The highest score, 3.7, appears for item 1 and 5. This suggests that students feel most confident about their ability to achieve good grades and perform well overall.

Control Beliefs for Learning (2 items)

Table 8

Mean for Control Beliefs for Learning

		Mean
1	ECCBQ1If I study in appropriate ways, then I will be able to learn the material in the courses of this program	4
2	ECCBQ 2If I try hard enough, then I will understand the course materials.	4.1

Table 8 shows that participants see their success as partly theirs to control. They believe strategic studying (4) plays a slightly bigger role than just working hard (4.1) in influencing their learning. This awareness of their control empowers them to take ownership of their journey and seek out strategies to boost their progress.

Conclusion

Summary of Findings and Discussions

This section provides an overview and analysis of the main findings based on the research questions. The first research question seeks answers to how learners perceive Value components in the learning of ESL. In the context of this study, value components are measured by intrinsic goal orientation, extrinsic goal orientation, and task value beliefs. The data for intrinsic goal orientation indicates that understanding course content is particularly valued by participants. They find course content intrinsically interesting and highly value the opportunity to learn new things and tackle challenging material. In addition, participants also

value learning English for external rewards, especially getting good grades. With high mean scores data to value the tasks and activities they engage in, the elements in task beliefs values are perceived by participants as being personally significant, transferable, beneficial and interesting. This high perceived value, possibly enhanced by the emphasis on the relevance and comprehension of course material, could enhance their motivation and success in the program. This finding concurs with Hoi (2022) which mentioned that learning in a supportive environment positively impacts students' motivational beliefs. Hence, it is evident that intrinsic and extrinsic goals, as well as task beliefs are values that are significant for students in learning ESL.

The second research question attempts responses to how learners perceive Expectancy components in the learning of ESL. In the context of this study, expectancy components are measured through students' perception of self-efficacy and control beliefs for learning. Students' self-efficacy beliefs about their English language learning are highly ranged. They feel most confident about their ability to achieve good grades and perform well overall. Participants also see their success as partly theirs to control. They believe strategic studying has a little greater impact on their learning than simply working hard. Being aware of their control helps them to take ownership of their journey and seek out strategies to enhance their progress. This finding supports Loh (2019) who found that when students are having trouble with their studies, they might lower the importance of tasks to boost their self-esteem and focus more on the subjects where they have done well. Therefore, expectancy components in learning English are perceived positively by participants and the data matches their self efficacy and control beliefs in learning (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002).

(Pedagogical) Implications and Suggestions for Future Research

This paper has presented and highlighted the importance of values and expectancy in understanding ESL learners' learning strategies. The present findings also provide significant pedagogical implications for enhancing students' motivation in learning. First, as course content is highly valued by participants, educators are part of the contributing factors to make a satisfying, smooth and comprehensible learning experience deemed by the learners. This would involve several key considerations and strategies including logical content organization, engaging instructional design especially utilizing visual aids and multimedia, and providing feedback and support. Second, external rewards, specifically good grades are an important self-awareness among students to gain success. Educators can play a big and important role here by providing and reminding students to be mindful of doing practices after practices to get familiar with the examination questions and patterns. Third, the positive findings for students' self-efficacy and beliefs, is a valid factor for educators to encourage and motivate students by any permissible means. Among the efforts include creating and maintaining a positive learning environment, helping the students setting clear goals, fostering active participation, catering different learning styles, and connecting learning to real-life contexts. The pedagogical suggestions above shed light on the significance of values and expectancy in comprehending ESL learner's learning strategies and the crucial role educators can play in fostering motivation among students.

As the research design for the present study is quantitative, future studies should take into consideration students' views to gain in depth information about expectancy and value in learning English. In addition, for a more inclusive discussion of the topic, other variables from the Pintrich & De Groot (1990) instrument, are recommended. It is also encouraged to conduct future research on larger sample sizes and various types of learners.

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