

Factors affecting undergraduate students' motivation at a university in Tra Vinh

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ABSTRACT: Motivation plays an important role in foreign language learning process. This study aimed to investigate student's motivation patterns towards English language learning at a University in Tra Vinh, and factors affecting their motivation change toward English language learning of non-English-major students in the semester. The researcher used semi-structured interview at the first phase of choosing the participants and writing reflection through the instrument called "My English Learning Motivation History" adapted from Sawyer (2007) to collect qualitative data within 15 weeks. The participants consisted of nine first year non-English-major students who learning General English at pre-intermediate level. They were chosen and divided into three groups of three members each (high motivation group; average motivation group; and low motivation group). The results of the present study identified six visual motivation patterns of three groups of students with different motivation fluctuation, through the use of cluster analysis. The study also indicated a diversity of factors affecting students' motivation involving internal factors as influencing factors (cognitive, psychology, and emotion) and external factors as social factors (instructor, peers, family, and learning environment) during English language learning in a period of 15 weeks. The findings of the study helped teacher understand relationship of motivation change and its influential factors. Furthermore, the findings also inspired next research about motivation development in learning English process.

KEY WORDS: *language learning motivation, motivation change, motivation patterns, influential factors, students' motivation.*

I. INTRODUCTION

In the 4.0 era, advanced needs and wants underscore the crucial role of foreign language education in national development and global integration. In the national assembly conference for the orientation of foreign language education in 2009, MOET (Minister of Education and Training), Nguyen Thien Nhan, a chairman said that policy of language education and language planning is very necessary, teaching and learning language must be boosted up continually and nonstop, English must be a top-policy and language planning must be a national instrument for national target and others, by the year 2020, English must be a L2 (second language) rather than EFL (English as Foreign Language), being ensure for that.

Nowadays, the role of English is significantly increasing and enhancing in the all corners of contexts of socio-economic and education growths with the year 2020 National Foreign Language Project, English language teaching and learning is more and more positive contributed and unplaced. Tra Vinh University (TVU) is a good example for boosting the enhancing English language teaching and learning, as a part of language educational policy and language planning in Tra Vinh provincial region. In fact, learning language is influenced by variety of many factors, so the streamline of English language education underlies standstills due to many different reason and internal and external factors including socio-psychology age, race, ethnicity, economic socio-status, ethnocentrism, cultures, and perceptions of emotions of language learners involved like attitudes, beliefs motivation, cognition and strategies in English language learning.

Recently, the Vietnam Institute of Educational Sciences coordinated with the National Foreign Language Project Management Board to organize a workshop to announce the 12 annual report with the topic "Teaching and learning foreign languages in Vietnam" on December 27, 2023. One of the remarkable statements of Professor Le Anh Vinh at the 2023 annual report announcement conference with the topic "Teaching and learning foreign languages in Vietnam" is that although receiving attention, during the implementation process, teaching and learning foreign languages in Vietnam still encounters numerous challenges like awareness of teachers and learners. Regarding to learners' awareness of learning foreign languages, it is imperative to acknowledge the pivotal role played by the factor of learning motivation. In fact, the issue of pertaining to motivation formation and motivating development plays a central position in educational institutions [1].

In order to learn English, learners have to hold motivation so that they can be successful in learning a language. Therefore, the roles of motivation are very crucial during the teaching and learning process. Firstly, motivation determines learning empowerment. Secondly, it is strongly related to the meaning of learning. Thirdly, motivation affects the learning endurance and perseverance of learners. It is thus irritable that motivation is a key factor that helps language learners get achievement. Motivation is one of the most fundamental factors in the second language learning process, particularly among university students [2]. It helps determine the level of proficiency achieved by different learners.

Actually, in English language learning process, learners may be negatively influenced by various factors in which these influences are able to cause a significant effect on their motivation in language learning [3].

The previous studies posited that learning motivation may develop or diminish throughout the learning process. With this view, to persist in language learning, it is useful to understand developmental pattern of students motivation during learning process and furthermore language teachers need to clearly understand differences or similarities between the motivational patterns of individual so that it is able to be drew from the invisible to visible patterns of learning motivation through this present study. With this in mind, it is important to understanding how individual's learning motivation will change in English learning phase.

The study is to investigate changing patterns of EFL undergraduate students' motivation in the period of English language learning. Also, the study examines the relationships between TVU students' internal and external factors and their motivation towards learning English language. Especially, this study conducted to answer two following questions.

1. *How do EFL undergraduate student report their changes in motivation?*
2. *What factors affect students' learning of English?*

This study holds seven important points of significance. Firstly, it aims to provide valuable insights into English education in Tra Vinh province for educators and decision makers. Second, it seeks to understand the diverse values and meanings of education and the role of foreign language learning in local contexts. In addition, the study also investigated the motivation of participants in Tra Vinh province with economic difficulties. It also endeavors to develop and apply theories suitable for language education in different contexts, shedding light on the factors that influence language learners. Furthermore, it establishes the foundation for future research on language teaching, learning and bilingual-trilingual education programs, contributing essential data for educational policy and English language planning.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Motivation and Language learning motivation

The study is couched within the theoretical framework with theories of motivation and relevant perspectives help to provide evidences or causes for the process of learner successes or failures in language learning. Also, the study is situated within the concept of motivation and influential factors in foreign language learning that are believed to be involved by students.

Theories of motivation including behavioristic perspectives, cognitive perspectives, and constructivist perspectives. Provided with various perspectives on motivation, this section attempts to draw a connection among them, linking them altogether to produce a comprehensive framework.

According to Brow [4], there are three schools of thought in defining motivation, from behavioristic perspectives, cognitive perspectives, and constructivist perspectives. From a behavioristic perspective, motivation is defined as the anticipation of reward which is driven to achieve positive reinforcement and driven by previous experiences of reward for behavior. From the cognitive perspective, motivation seeks to explain human behaviors linked with states, perceptions and emotion as an abstract product of the careful study and active processing and interpretation of information received. From a constructivist perspective, motivation is derived as much from a person's interaction with others for it is from one's self-determination. In the context of foreign language acquisition, motivation can be inferred as an encouragement whether it is internally or externally to help a person to learn a language.

According to Dörnyei and Skehan [5] also explained motivation in broad terms, that is, motivation has responsibility for answer three questions, why people decide to do something; how long they are willing to persist the activity; and how hard they are going to induce it. Likewise, according to Williams and Burden [6] there are three stages illustrated in motivation. First, the individual's interest or enthusiasm is aroused; Second, the individual consciously decided what action to take; Third, the individual needs to persist until the desired goal is achieved.

The term "motivation" has been constructed from various perspective. Gardner [7] defined motivation is concerned with a question why language learners are motivated. Gardner states that it is essential to understand the learners' actual goal or purpose for learning the language. He indicates two dissimilar orientations of learner in his theory of second language learning motivation; namely, integrative orientation and instrumental orientation, both of which affect foreign language learners in one way or another [8]. Generally, in learning foreign or second language, both integrative motivation and instrumental motivation or intrinsic motivation and extrinsic motivation impact learner's learning process. They enhance students' learning inputs.

Thus, as presented above, motivation is revealed with various viewpoints by a great amount of researchers. Several studies have stressed the importance of the multi-dimension nature of the phenomenon of motivation. Nonetheless, the present study follows the cognitive perspectives of motivation, that is, motivation is a psychological attribution with the function of promoting the orientation of human activities, motivation involves stimulus of internal and external factors which motivate human act to satisfy their needs and desires.

2.2. Motivation changes of English as foreign language (EFL) learners

Seeking to account for the change of motivation in learning language, Dörnyei [9] emphasis on the process of motivation and not on motivation as a product. Teachers and school administrators focus on motivation as process, because they have to understand how their students' motivation change during learning process. In fact, the change of motivation encompasses gradually, through a complex mental process that consists initial planning and goal construction, target formation and task initiation, and finally action implementation and control.

Shortly, there are many various components in motivation construction that researchers revealed, and motivation change depends on these components. However, the present study refers to the change of motivation based on the impact of external factors and students' awareness toward English language learning process. In other words, motivation change occurs as a result of a combination of internal and external influences. These factors will be believed that has a strong influence on learners' motivation change.

2.3. Related studies

In the past, plenty of studies conducted and suggested that the intensity of motivation was able to change on a minute-to-minute during lessons in particular and during learning process in general. Among them Mira [10], Pawlak [11], Busse and Walter [12], Waninge et al [13], Selcuk and Erten [14] and Castro [15] attempted to explore how motivation changes over time on an individual level and in learner's individual learning context. Indeed, the researcher also indicated that motivation can change at different levels when studied across various interacting time scales.

In recent years, there have been many researchers conducting studies on factors affecting students' learning motivation and students' motivation change.

The study conducted by Trần Thị Thanh Huyền, Hoàng Thị Mai Anh, Nguyễn Ngọc Mai [16] on Factor affecting the Students' Learning Motivation of the Faculty of Accounting and Business Management, Vietnam National University of Agriculture with 190 participants using methods such as Cronbach's alpha, Exploratory Factor Analysis, and regression analysis. The findings revealed that there are both negative influences and positive influences on students' learning motivation including subjective and objective factors like individual characteristics, peer and societies, and others. Due to a diversity of reasons, the research gap of this study is examining the various developmental patterns on motivation in English learning process.

Lee, Hsin-I., et al [17] carried on the study of motivation change in foreign language learning in Chinese higher education. The study investigated motivation changes in language learning by utilizing Keller's ARCS model and Dörnyei's three-level motivational theory, identifying 14 influencing factors. The findings showed that the most critical factors affecting motivation level in language learning were group-specific motivational components, course-specific components and teacher-specific components. Seeking to enhance teaching quality, foster foreign language learning, and nurture language talents is this study's contributions. However, it is clearly seen that there are still various factors which badly influence student's learning motivation levels during period of language learning. In order to account for the factors affecting learning motivation change in a case study, this research gap need to explore.

A recent study has been carried out by Yu and Geng [18], the purpose of the study was to explore the lifelong journey of acquiring proficiency in a second/foreign language, focusing on the motivations. Twenty Chinese PhD students learning English in both domestic (EFL) and overseas (ESL) contexts were the participants of the study. A longitudinal study design including semi-structured interview were used for this study to collect data. The findings explored a continuity of autonomous motivation over time and diverse contexts, with a significant change in the frequency of controlled motivation between EFL and ESL settings. Notably, the study highlighted that fluctuations in external regulation (controlled motivation) during various schooling phases, affected by factors like enrollment pressure in China and the communication requirements during overseas PhD studies. Overall, the dynamic nature of language learners' motivation is emphasized, formed by educational levels and learning contexts.

The study of Wang [19] set out to investigate (L2) motivation of five Chinese undergraduate students majoring in Bulgarian and engaging in a one-academic-year exchange program in Bulgaria. The author utilized a quasi-RQM approach in the study to explore L2 learning situation. The findings identified three motivational patterns during the study abroad: decreasing motivation with a weakened ideal Bulgarian self, fluctuating motivation with a weakened ideal Bulgarian self, and fluctuating motivation with a strengthened ideal Bulgarian self. With these results of the study, it is clearly seen that the primary motivation of the students was shaped by their own proactive perceptions and interpretations of their learning journey and personal interactions throughout the program.

III. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Instrument

This research used semi-structured interview at the first phase of choosing the participants for the study and the instrument called “My English Learning Motivation History” (MELMH) adapted from Sawyer (2007) [20] to collect qualitative data through writing reflection within 15 weeks. The interview questions consisted of nine questions which were commonly used to gain information and to deeply look at the viewpoint and thoughts of the participants. The instrument was designed to measure students’ motivation changes weekly and to identify factors affecting their English language learning.

The data collected in this study were qualitative data. Responses from students were analyzed through cluster analysis to identify factors affecting motivation in different periods [14]. Furthermore, this study used the line graph to shed light on motivation patterns of students toward English language learning in their learning semester [21]. Thus, the researcher used excel to map out line graphs to help visualize thorough understanding about the motivation patterns of students over period of time.

3.2. Participants

The population in this study were 30 students of Tra Vinh University consisting of 20 students majoring in automotive engineering technology and 10 mechanical engineering technology students. After interviewing at the first stage, the participants in this study were nine first year undergraduate students who are learning General English at the first term of 2023-2024 academic year at level 1 in equivalent to pre-intermediate level. Nine participants took part in the study had motivation levels corresponding to low, average and high. They were divided into three groups. Each group involved three students who had the same levels of motivation at the initial point. Three groups presented for three levels of motivation as follows:

- 1) A group of high motivation (G1)
- 2) A group of average motivation (G2)
- 3) A group of low motivation (G3)

3.3. Procedures

First, the instruments were piloted in the pre-stage of the study. The aims of these activities are to find out and correct any misunderstanding in both structure and content of those interview questions and the tool. Before conducting the research, piloting represents measurement of reliability of instruments used within this research. Specifically, the author piloted semi-interview with 8 students before carrying out the real interview with EFL students. In addition, the tool MELMH was piloted by giving to 5 EFL students who are different from the participants. Then, the author continued giving this tool to 5 English teachers to receive their comments for that tool. As a result, interview questions and the tool were corrected in order to employ in the current research with reliability.

IV. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. Findings

4.1.1. The patterns of motivation and factors affecting these patterns in English Language Learning

Despite the similarities in English learning settings, the results showed each group’s motivational patterns considerably differ in their fluctuations of motivation to learn English within 15 (fifteen) weeks, and the changing patterns of their motivation is due to a diversity of influential factors inside and outside of students during their learning process.

The findings identified six distinct motivation patterns, based on their initial and eventual levels of motivation with a pair of adjectives: “low-high”, “low-average”, “average-low”, “average-average”, “average-high”, and “high-high”. In particular, after analyzing qualitative data, in group 1, only one pattern of motivation appeared, that was “high-high”. In group 2, there were three patterns found out: “average-low”; “average-average”; “average-high”. In group 3, two patterns named: “low-high”, “low-average”.

In order to focus on key patterns of motivation, the result reported a case study of the individual through subsections of changing patterns of 9 (nine) participants involved in and influential factors separately.

4.1.1.1. The pattern of motivation in Group 1:

The present study showed the pattern of motivation change in group 1 is the “high-high” pattern (Fig. 1).

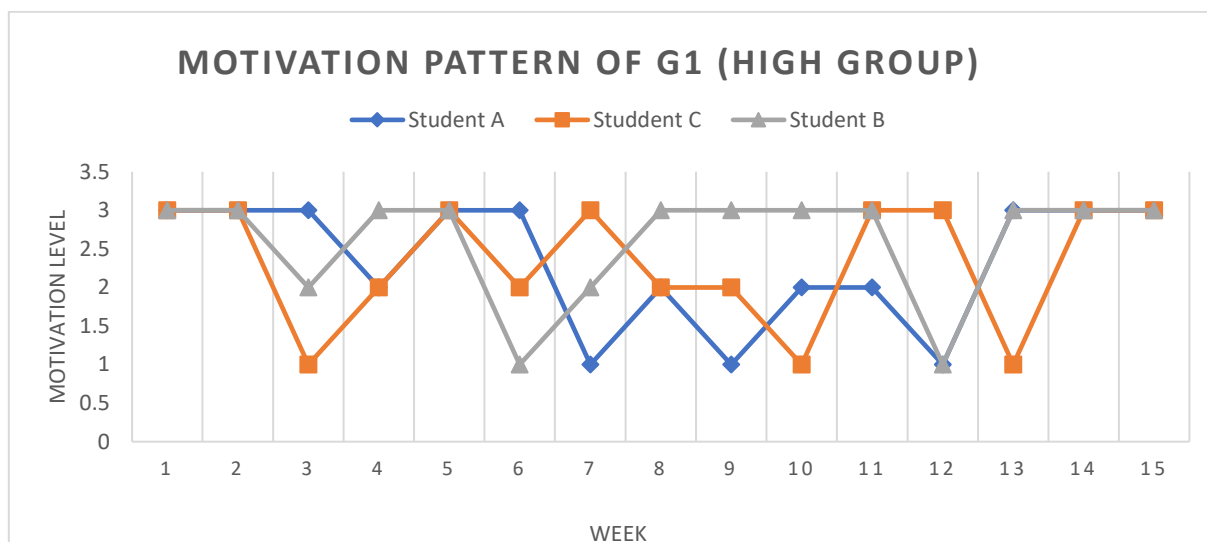


Figure 1: Motivation pattern of the high motivation group

The motigraph illustrated in figure 1 shows that the motivation level of three students at the first week was high and after English learning period of fifteen weeks, their motivation level remained high at the end of the semester in spite of some fluctuation in their motivation at certain time. The general tendency of three students in this pattern was sustaining high motivation to learn English in spite of several factor affecting their motivation in English learning process.

The present study indicated factors affecting students’ motivation patterns in learning English process. Firstly, social factors cause fluctuations in motivation levels, as clearly seen with students “A”, her motivation intensity sharply decreased at weeks seven, nine and twelve from high motivation to average and even low motivation due to external influences. Next, psychological factors was also play a role, evident in student "A" feeling exhausted from excessive work, leading to decreased motivation. Student "B" similarly faced a decline in motivation because of a peer's death, showing negative attitudes towards English learning. Emotional factors significantly impact students’ motivation changes. Low self-efficacy contributed to reduce motivation, alongside factors like intelligence and language aptitude. External and internal factors, such as environmental, psychological, and personal characteristics, influenced motivation intensity. In fact, student "C" presented more unstable motivation levels, impacted by the instructor's teaching methods and environmental factors like weather and facilities. Thus, innovative teaching methods and enthusiastic instructors contribute to sustaining high motivation levels despite fluctuations.

Importantly, there are various reasons for the retaining high motivation in the “high-high” pattern. Apart from that, due to innovative teaching methodology and enthusiastic instructor fostered their motivation during learning process especially that help sustain high motivation after sharp falls.

4.1.1.2. The pattern of motivation in Group 2:

The results revealed three distinct patterns of motivation within group 2: "average-low", "average-average", and "average-high"(Fig. 2). Despite belonging to the same group, their motivation patterns varied by the end of the semester. Throughout the weeks, their motivation intensity differed from one another, with some experiencing development, consistency, or decline in motivation levels.

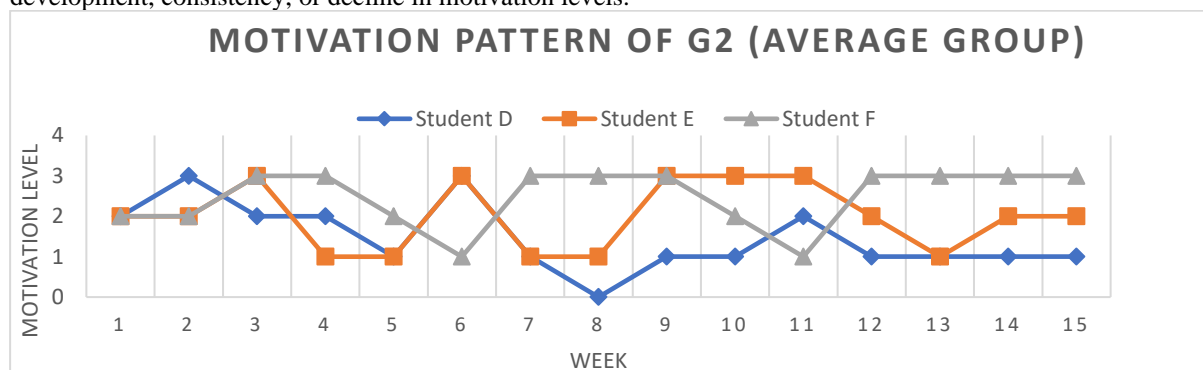


Figure 2: Motivation pattern of the average motivation group

The analysis revealed a pattern of "average-low" motivation among certain students, starting with an average level in the first week but declining to a low level by the fifteenth week. Initially average, their motivation slightly increased before stabilizing, then ultimately decreased. As can be seen from the data, motivational intensity did not retain even though it showed a dramatic fall from the fifth week to the fifteenth week. Notably, student "D" displayed a reverse trend in motivation development.

The "average – low" pattern

In sharp contrast with the "high-high" pattern, the "average-low" pattern speedily decreased. Reducing concentration due to external factors like holidays, teacher absences, and replacements in the classroom led to diminished motivation initially. However, motivation started to rise again in week 6 when the student's mood improved. From this view, emotional factors significantly influenced motivation intensity. Secondly, students' perception of learning English was found out as a crucial factor influencing motivation shifts. Those in this pattern experienced a rapid decline in motivation levels, largely influenced by their perception of English learning. Additionally, grades and students' perceptions significantly impacted motivation changes, particularly evident in student "D" affected by external (grades) and psychological factors (negative thoughts). Facing obstacles led to negative emotions, decreased persistence, and self-condemnation, highlighting low self-efficacy. The "average-low" pattern students struggled to utilize cognitive abilities, losing hope and becoming demoralized over English inadequacies.

The "average-average" pattern

While the "average-low" pattern had downward trend, the "average-average" pattern had maintainable trend in spite of its intricate development. This pattern started with average motivation level at the beginning semester and ended with average motivation level at the ending semester.

The study reported reasons for maintaining average motivational intensity in the "average-average" pattern were primarily psychological factors, such as emotions and feelings. The student "E" felt comfortable and relaxed without learning difficulties but expressed helplessness when faced with obstacles, showing motivation only persisted without learning pressure. Motivation briefly increased in the third week due to an upcoming holiday but quickly declined under test pressure. Motivation fluctuations occurred in an M-shape, primarily influenced by external factors. Social events initially affected learning attitude positively and negatively, sharply declining in the fourth and the fifth weeks. Curriculum scheduling and test pressure also contributed to motivation decline due to the student's anxious psychology. The study emphasized high intrinsic motivation as crucial for persisting motivation among obstacles.

The "average-high" pattern

The study identified that the students "F" illustrated for the "average- high" pattern. This motivation pattern explained for the started point of motivation level was average and the ending point was high at the last week in the semester. Initially, student "F" began with an average motivation level. It peaked in weeks 3 and 4, dipped slightly in weeks 5 and 6, steadily increased from week 7 to week 9, declined in weeks 10 and 11, then rose again until the end of the term. This pattern demonstrates an upward trend following fluctuations in motivational intensity over time.

Student "F" encountered motivation fluctuations due to physical condition in weeks 6 and 11. Illness in the sixth week led to exhaustion, affecting class attendance. According to student "F" response, in the eleventh week, he excessively played games that caused distraction from English learning. Despite challenges, motivation remained high overall, driven by short and long-term goals such as passing exams and obtaining a scholarship for studying abroad. This sustained motivation indicated the importance of goal-setting in maintaining high motivation levels.

4.1.1.3. The pattern of motivation in Group 3:

In group three, two patterns of motivation revealed including the "low-high" pattern and the "low-average" pattern (Fig. 3). They both were closely similar since the overall trend of patterns increased. However, their motivation change process was not the same in total. Two patterns were described through below sub-patterns.

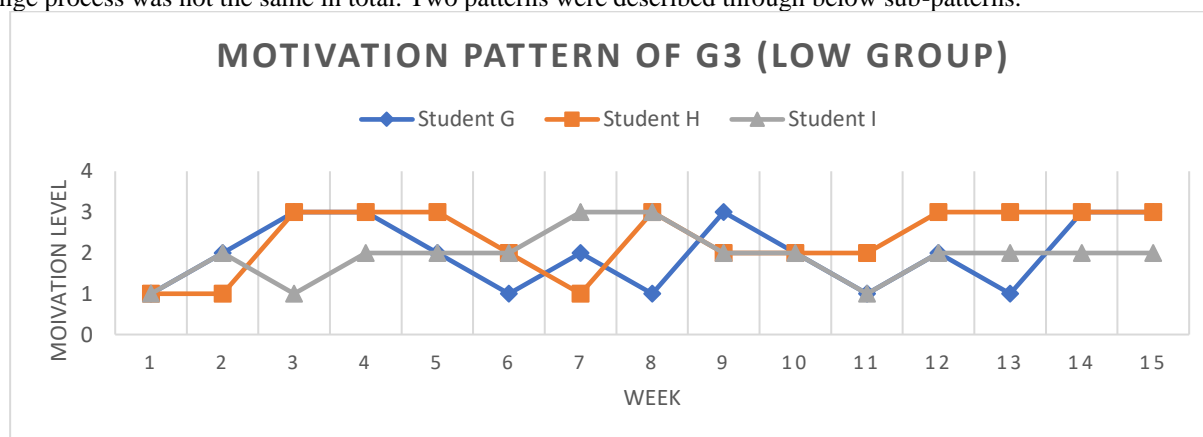


Figure 3: Motivation pattern of the low motivation group

The “low-high” pattern

The “low-high” pattern were demonstrated by two students including student “G” and student “H”. Although their pattern of motivation had the same tendency at the initial point (shown as “low”) and at the ending point (shown as high), the findings identified the motivation change process of two students obviously differ.

The result identified that during the initial phase from week 1 to week 4, student “G” motivation intensity gradually increased due to integrative motivation stemming from his enjoyment in English speaking and desire to communicate with foreigners. This period reflected his positive attitude towards learning English. However, this upward trajectory lasted just two weeks, then his motivation started to decline from week 5 onwards, fluctuating between average and low levels until week 9. The student's motivation stabilized briefly but continued to decrease steadily from weeks 10 to 13, accompanied by feelings of frustration when encountering learning difficulties.

Student “H” illustrated a “low-high” motivation pattern like student “G,” but their motivation trajectories differed significantly. While student “G” experienced fluctuations between low and high motivation, student “H” predominantly maintained high motivation levels, with only a brief decline within the first two weeks and in week 7. However, due to the upcoming final exam, and with strong sense of self-confidence, the level of motivation remained high with only two weeks remaining.

The “low-average” pattern

The second pattern of group 3 is the “low-average” which was demonstrated by student “I”. This pattern started with low motivation and gradually reached an average level. Comparatively, students “G” and “H” in the “low-high” pattern exhibited higher motivation levels than student “I”.

Student “I” experienced fluctuations in motivation from low to average levels during the first four weeks due to factors like discomfort with new classmates and lack of confidence in learning strategies. Initially, she lacked clear goals and learning plans, leading to decreased motivation. By the seventh week, her motivational intensity reached the high point as she recognized the importance of English for future job prospects and received positive feedback from peers. Despite sustaining average motivation levels, there was an unexpected decline in the eleventh week due to physical reasons. Thus, the study convinced that setting a specific goal was important to sustain motivation.

4.2. Discussion

From the findings above, it can be concluded that the motivation pattern of TVU non-English-major students toward English language learning changed according to two ways: negative way and positive way. These findings support previous research revealed that motivation developed in a state of flux during the course of English learning [12], [10], [11], [13], [22], [23]. The results of the study are also aligned with another study [24] in term of fluctuation of motivation in learning process. Indeed, the study examined changes in motivational dynamics and factors contributing to motivation intensity changes during sessions in learning English. However, in comparison with empirical studies, the motivation patterns of the present study are more diverse. That implies students’ motivation might increase at a certain level in spite of its beginning point is low. It is influenced and nurtured by both internal and external factors. The development of student’s motivation depends greatly on these factors. In particular, the patterns of motivation identified in this study grew up and grew down more complicatedly than others.

From cognitive view of motivation indicates that students' goals and perceptions of English learning help them overcome challenges. Motivation patterns are affected by internal factors such as anxiety, negative attitudes, and low self-confidence and low self – efficiency in Learning English. The findings are also consistent with those of Shao K et al [25] who found a clearer picture of L2 learners’ emotions and their motivation in second language acquisition.

It is therefore likely that despite facing challenges, students' desire for success, coupled with enthusiastic teaching and effective teaching methods, helped to boost their motivation to learn English. Indeed, teaching method has a great influence on students’ motivation in their learning. Obviously, the study of Pranawengtias [2] indicated that the primary influences of students' learning motivation were extrinsic motivation factors such as rewards and punishments along with the quality of instructors and the teaching-learning process.

V. CONCLUSION

Motivation plays a crucial role in English language learning, especially for EFL undergraduate students at a University in Tra Vinh. As presented in the study, motivation came from three levels: low, average, and high. The current study identified six motivation patterns among undergraduate students over a single semester and determined the compatibility of each student with these patterns. It was found that a student's motivational level would be influenced by the characteristics of the pattern they align with. Students in the high group sustained high motivation, while those in the average group showed varying levels of motivation. Low motivation group students displayed either an upward or downward trajectory in motivation. The present study shed more light on motivational changing issues. Understanding these patterns can assist teachers in tailoring motivational strategies and curriculum reform to enhance language learning effectiveness. This study emphasizes the importance of monitoring and nurturing students' motivation throughout their learning journey, ultimately improving second language acquisition outcomes.

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