

English students' perceptions of their motivation having online classes during the Covid-19 pandemic

Percepciones de estudiantes de inglés sobre su motivación al tener clases en línea durante la pandemia de Covid-19

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Abstract:

The transition from face-to-face classes to online classes due to the Covid-19 pandemic had a great impact on English Language Teaching students which shaped their opinions about their motivation. For this reason, this qualitative research aims to describe how online classes influenced English students' motivation during the Covid-19 pandemic in a public university in Mexico. Seven students were interviewed. Results showed that students experienced low motivation during the pandemic due to three main reasons: distractions that they had at home, lack of social interaction and lack of feedback. Nevertheless, what kept them motivated was their intrinsic motivation. In contrast, their motivation when having face-to-face classes was higher by far.

Keywords:

Motivation, English, Covid-19, higher education

Resumen:

La transición de clases presenciales a clases en línea, debido a la pandemia de Covid-19, tuvo un gran impacto en los estudiantes de la Enseñanza de la Lengua Inglesa, por lo que influyó en sus opiniones sobre su motivación; por tal motivo, esta investigación cualitativa tiene como objetivo describir cómo las clases en línea influyeron en la motivación de los estudiantes de inglés durante la pandemia del Covid-19 en una Universidad de Pachuca, Hidalgo. Siete estudiantes fueron entrevistados. Los resultados mostraron que los estudiantes experimentaron baja motivación durante la pandemia debido a las distracciones que tenían en casa, la falta de interacción social y la falta de retroalimentación; sin embargo, lo que los mantuvo motivados fue su motivación intrínseca. En cambio, su motivación a la hora de tener clases presenciales era mucho más alta.

Palabras Clave:

Motivación, inglés, Covid-19, educación superior

Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic changed many aspects of the teaching and learning process in the world, being one of them the transition from face-to-face to online teaching and learning. During this period, students formed different opinions about their motivation towards studying English as a result of having online classes. As English Foreign Language (EFL) teachers, students' level of motivation is a matter of concern because it may affect their learning process either positively or negatively. Therefore, it is important to learn about the reasons for the increase or decrease of students' motivation in order to know how to

deal with this phenomenon which might affect not only students, but also teachers. Motivation may interfere with their teaching process, even more now after having experienced a pandemic that totally changed our lives. Previous studies worldwide have raised awareness about the importance of this topic. For instance, a study carried out in China by Huang, Shi and Yang (2020) that gathered data on students' experiences of emergency remote teaching of English found that students' motivation to learn English was mainly extrinsically or instrumentally driven. Moreover, qualitative research conducted by Kamisli and Akinlar (2022) to understand experiences of English learners during the pandemic in Turkey revealed that students had low motivation to study and participate

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in classes. Likewise, different studies in Mexico that aimed to describe English students' experiences and challenges of emergency remote teaching during the Covid-19 pandemic have shown remarkable consistency of motivational issues among students. For example, Juárez-Díaz and Perales (2021) administered a questionnaire to 32 students to describe students' emergency remote teaching experiences and emotions. Results revealed that all of the participants had negative feelings during the pandemic, including lack of motivation. Moreover, Liberos and Schrijve (2021) conducted classroom observations and interviews with 39 English learners to analyse the challenges that they faced during the pandemic. The findings showed that students experienced emotional problems related to demotivation, stress, and anxiety. Similarly, Balderas-Solís, Roque-Hernández, Salazar-Hernández and López-Mendoza (2021) administered a questionnaire to 969 students from five different BA programs in a Mexican university to identify students' perceptions about COVID-19 experiences. Although the participants in their study "reported positive views about class schedules, interactivity with the professor, assessment methods, exam delivery methods, session length and frequency" (Balderas-Solís et al., 2021, p.9), they also found that almost one-third of them experienced lack of motivation. However, little research has been done in this particular context that can inform teachers about students' motivation during the pandemic. Hence, this research aims to describe how online classes influenced English students' motivation during the Covid-19 pandemic in a University from Pachuca, Hidalgo. As a result, the following research questions are set:

- What are students' perceptions about their motivation towards studying English during the Covid-19 pandemic?
- What are the reasons for the increase or decrease of students' motivation during the Covid-19 pandemic?

This research is divided into five sections. I first describe the study. Then, I provide an in-depth understanding of what motivation is and I discuss previous studies on the topic. After that, I describe the methodology that supports my study. In the next section, I discuss the findings obtained in order to answer my research questions. Finally, I provide the conclusions of this research.

1. Literature Review

1.1 Overview

In this section, the theoretical framework of this research study is discussed in detail in order to provide a better understanding of the topic. As stated in the introduction above, motivation plays an important role because high motivation involves sustaining interest and investing time

and energy which allows putting the necessary effort to achieve certain goals; the lack of motivation that students present leads them to get negative results in their learning performance (Hermanto, Rai & Fahmi, 2021). For this reason, it is very important to investigate students' perceptions of their own motivation. This section starts by defining motivation. Then, it provides an explanation of the types of motivation. Finally, it discusses some studies that are related to English students' motivation during the Covid-19 pandemic.

1.2 Motivation

Motivation has been defined in many ways by various authors. For instance, Dörnyei and Ushioda (2013) argue that motivation is "what moves a person to make certain choices, to engage in action, to expend effort and persist in action" (p. 3). Moreover, Williams and Burden (as cited in Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2013) mention that motivation is not only arousing interest, it also involves investing time and energy to achieve certain goals. Similarly, Armstrong and Taylor (2014) state that "motivation is the force that energizes, directs and sustains behavior" (p. 169).

Therefore, it can be said that motivation, in general terms, is "the strength and direction of behaviour and the factors that influence people to behave in certain ways" (Armstrong & Taylor, 2014, p. 170). At this point, it is important to mention that motivation is categorised into two types, which are discussed in the next section.

1.3 Types of Motivation

Motivation can be categorised into intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. Intrinsic motivation refers to the "behaviour performed for its own sake in order to experience pleasure and satisfaction, such as the joys of doing a particular activity or satisfying one's curiosity" (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2013, p. 23). Therefore, it can be said that intrinsic motivation occurs when people feel that what they are doing is important, interesting or challenging (Armstrong & Taylor, 2014, p. 170).

The second type of motivation —extrinsic motivation— is defined as the motivation that "involves performing a behaviour as a means to some separable end, such as receiving an extrinsic reward (e.g. good grades) or avoiding punishment" (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2013, p. 23). In simpler words, this type of motivation comes from outside of the individual because of the desire of obtaining a possible reward, a promotion, or even a punishment (Tohidi & Jabbari, 2012). For this reason, even if extrinsic motivation may have an immediate and powerful effect, it does not necessarily mean that it will last long (Armstrong & Taylor, 2014).

1.4 Previous Studies

Several studies have been carried out regarding students' motivation in their English classes during the coronavirus

pandemic. Some of them discuss intrinsic and extrinsic motivation; others analyse the correlation between motivation and achievement, and others use the term attitudes to report learners' behaviour towards online classes as discussed below.

Gustiani (2020) carried out a study in order to know students' motivation at Sriwijaya Polytechnics in Indonesia. Interviews were conducted with eight participants for individual interviews and fourteen participants for group interviews. This study found that during online learning, students' intrinsic motivation increased because of two main reasons: "(1) ambition or belief to learn and gain new knowledge; and (2) enjoyment in experiencing new learning method" (p. 32). Similar results were found by Smith et al. (2021) in a quantitative case study; questionnaires were administered to 90 high-school students in Canada. They concluded that extroverted students increased their motivation, while introverted students remained stable with the possible explanation that "students were enthusiastic about reintegrating school after months of remote learning" (p. 6).

Another study was conducted by Hermanto, Rai and Fahmi (2021) in Indonesia adopting a quantitative approach; they administered questionnaires to 238 participants with the purpose of describing university students' opinions about online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. Results revealed that students do not enjoy their online classes; however, their motivation comes from the fact that they have more time to spend studying or being with their family.

In contrast to the previous study, the research conducted by Subakthiasih and Putri (2020) at Mahasaraswati University in Indonesia, by administering 90 questionnaires, indicated that "the motivation to learn English that comes from inside students was higher than the motivation from outside students" (p. 126).

Motivation has also been studied to analyse its correspondence with achievement in English. For example, Rahardjo and Pertiwi (2020) carried out a quantitative study in Indonesia to identify the correlation between students' learning motivation and achievement in English learning during the Covid-19 pandemic. For this reason, questionnaires were administered to 420 students. The results suggested that most of the students gained high motivation during the pandemic, which has a significant correlation with their language achievement.

Adnan and Anwar (2020) conducted research in Pakistan. The main objective was to find the general attitudes of Pakistan higher education students towards online learning during the pandemic. They administered 126 questionnaires to 84 female and 42 male participants. The results showed that 10.3% of the participants agreed that

online learning is more motivating than conventional learning, 18.3% somewhat agreed, and 71.4% disagreed. These studies show that many students have strengthened their motivation by having online classes during the pandemic. However, many other students' motivation has decreased. The reason for this phenomenon could vary among them; some have to do with students' personalities (introverted or extroverted), and their experiences that may affect either their intrinsic or extrinsic motivation to learn English during the Covid-19 pandemic. Nevertheless, most of those studies have been carried out in Asia and one of them in Canada, while little research has been conducted in Mexico. Taking this into consideration and the fact that, as stated before, motivation is very important to achieve people's goals, it is worth going deeper into this topic in a Mexican setting.

2. Methodology

In this study, I adopt a constructivist worldview. This is because as Creswell (2014) mentions, constructivist worldviews "hold assumptions that individuals seek understanding of the world in which they live and work. Individuals develop subjective meanings of their experiences— meanings directed toward certain objects or things" (p. 8). Since the data collected is based on students' personal experiences, this constructivist worldview was the most appropriate for this research.

Furthermore, this worldview was suitable due to the fact that it allows me to adopt a qualitative approach. Owing to the fact that Creswell (2014) mentions that it is a method "for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem" (p. 4). It can be related to the main objective of this project because it intends to explore and understand a human problem.

The design is a case study. Yin (as cited in VanWynsberghe & Khan, 2007) describes it as "an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context" (p. 81). This definition matches with the qualitative design of this research which attempts to study a phenomenon, such as motivation, through students' personal experiences.

2.1 Setting

The present research was carried out at the "Instituto de Ciencias Sociales y Humanidades (ICSHu)", which is a public university that belongs to the Universidad Autónoma del Estado de Hidalgo. ICSHu is located in Pachuca, Hidalgo. More specifically, this research took place in the building where the BA in English Language Teaching is taught.

This university had been teaching in a face-to-face manner before the Covid-19 pandemic started. Then, because of the conditions and security procedures, they

had to go to an e-learning modality. It took around two years for the university to open its doors allowing the students to come back to their classrooms. These conditions made the university appropriate for the study to be carried out in this setting.

2.2 Participants

The criteria for selecting the participants were the result of taking into consideration that “the subjects sampled must be able to inform important facets and perspectives related to the phenomenon being studied” (Sargeant, 2012, p. 1). For this reason, the participants selected for this research were seven students from the sixth semester studying the BA in English Language Teaching. The participants’ range of age is from 20 to 21 years old with a B2 level of English. Students were randomly selected because the only condition was that they have experienced studying in the “Instituto de Ciencias Sociales y Humanidades” before the pandemic started.

2.3 Instruments

The instruments used to collect the data were semi-structured interviews consisting of open-ended questions. This is because this type of interview, as Cohen and Crabtree (2006) mention, “can provide reliable, comparable qualitative data” (p. 1). which matches the qualitative nature of this research. Moreover, they “allow informants the freedom to express their views in their own terms” (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006, p. 1) which is necessary for the data collection for this study. All the participants were previously informed that these interviews were private and used only for the purpose of this research study.

In order to make sure that the interviews worked properly and would not confuse the interviewees during the process of the interviews, the interviews were piloted before they were conducted.

2.4 Data Analysis

After conducting the interviews through online meetings, I transcribed them in order to start with the process of coding, which consists of “aggregating the text or visual data into small categories of information, seeking evidence for the code from different databases being used in a study, and then assigning a label to the code.” (Creswell, 2013, p. 206). Hence, I had to read the transcripts several times in order to have a better understanding of the participants’ answers. Then, I used a color code as I highlighted the extracts that contributed to answering my research questions. Finally, I wrote the codes on a different piece of paper to look for patterns among them. As some categories emerged from all seven participants’ answers.

Now I turn to discuss the results of this research.

3. Findings

The previous section discussed the methodology carried out in order to describe how online classes have influenced English students’ motivation during the Covid-19 pandemic in at a University from Pachuca, Hidalgo. Now I report the findings that led me to answer my research questions:

- What are students’ opinions about their motivation towards studying English during the Covid-19 pandemic?
- What are the reasons for the increase or decrease of students’ motivation during the Covid-19 pandemic?

Regarding the first research question, I found two common opinions that my participants shared during the interviews: they consider to have low motivation when having online classes during the pandemic and to have experienced higher motivation during face-to-face classes. As for the second research question, I found some factors that caused students’ lack of motivation — distractions at home, lack of social interaction and lack of feedback—, as well as the main factor that raised students’ motivation to keep learning English —intrinsic motivation—. These findings are discussed in detail below.

3.1 Students’ Opinions about Their Motivation Towards Studying English during the Covid-19 Pandemic.

The first research question of my study is about students’ opinions about their motivation towards studying English during the pandemic. I found that most of my participants did not feel motivated when having online classes during the pandemic. Furthermore, they markedly contrasted their motivation when having face-to-face classes and when having online classes, mentioning that they felt way more motivated when they took face to face classes.

3.1.1 No Motivation during Pandemic

Six participants out of seven claimed to be demotivated or to have very low motivation during the pandemic. For example, Participant 1, Participant 2, and Participant 4 mentioned, during the interview, that their motivation decreased to a great extent during the Covid-19 pandemic. One of them —participant 2— even said that it was the fact that she didn’t like online classes which made her feel unmotivated as shown below:

I would say I didn’t have much motivation. Yeah, I didn’t have any motivation at all. I mean, I just was there because I had to and that’s all. (Participant 1)

Well, to be honest, I didn’t really like online classes so I started feeling without motivation to attend to [sic] the sessions. (Participant 2)

My motivation decreased a lot during the pandemic. So, I was not motivated anymore to study the career but somehow, I managed to continue. (Participant 4)

As seen above, the three extracts show that my participants say that they did not have any motivation towards studying English during the Covid-19 pandemic. One of them –Participant 4–, even mentioned that her lack of motivation led her to have thoughts about dropping out of the BA. This reason can be related to what Dörnyei and Ushioda (2011) mention, as they suggest that motivation is what moves us to make certain choices. In this case, since Participant 4 was experiencing a lack of motivation, it led her to start considering dropping out of the university.

3.1.2 Higher Motivation during Face-to-Face Classes

Almost all the participants agreed on the big difference between their motivation when having online classes during the pandemic and when having face-to-face classes. They mentioned having experienced higher motivation when they returned to normal classes. For instance, Participant 1, Participant 3, and Participant 6 mentioned that they started to feel more motivated when they returned to face-to-face classes:

I'd say my motivation now is even higher than when we were in the pandemic. Even before the pandemic, I feel much, much, much motivated. (Participant 1)

Right now, I believe that even my motivation got a bust. And I think this has nothing to do with classes but rather, as I said, with the people I tend to meet every day and the new experiences I'm living. (Participant 3)

It's higher, it's higher by far. When I was taking online classes, I remember that I used to cry a lot because I didn't understand some topics and teachers were not really supportive in my point of view and now, I would say that it's amazing to go to the school... It's cool, I like it, I like my classes, I like my teachers, and I like my friends so it's amazing. (Participant 6)

These excerpts show that the participants consider that their motivation totally changed for the better when they came back to face-to-face classes. This change is due to so many reasons. For example, we can see in extract number two that Participant 3 thinks that it is a consequence of contact with people. Similarly, Participant number 6 mentions that her higher motivation is because she likes school, her teachers and her classmates. Moreover, participant 5 and participant 7 agree that they think they are learning better with face-to-face classes:

Higher, totally. Maybe because as I was saying, I feel like now I'm more focused on the classes... Also, I feel like I'm improving much more than I did when we were in the pandemic, my English... I feel motivated and

encouraged to continue learning and practicing. (Participant 5)

It's higher, definitely. I think that everything is working well. I feel like I'm learning, I'm really learning, and I think that I'm doing a good job. Yeah, I think that I'm doing great, that's why I feel my motivation is higher right now. And I think that I can do my best so yeah. (Participant 7)

These two extracts show a clear example that “motivation is the force that energizes, directs and sustains behavior” (Armstrong & Taylor, 2014, p. 169). As we can see, the fact that Participant 5 and Participant 7 felt that they were learning better with face-to-face classes, they were encouraged to keep practicing and do their best to learn more and more.

As we can see from the two sections above, almost all of my participants mentioned feeling unmotivated during the pandemic and in contrast, almost all of them mentioned having experienced higher motivation when returning to face-to-face classes.

3.2 Demotivating Factors of English Students during the Covid-19 Pandemic

The second research question of my study is about the reasons for the increase or decrease in students' motivation during the Covid-19 pandemic. From the interviews, I found that the students' lack of motivation to study English during the pandemic was a result of several aspects. Such aspects are described in a detailed way in the following paragraphs.

3.2.1 Distractions

Two participants out of seven agreed that the reason behind their lack of motivation was the fact that there were many distractions at home that didn't allow them to focus on their classes. Participant 1 and participant 5 expressed the following statements during the interview:

But then, I faced the reality that I needed a lot of self-control because when I was at home, I got distracted a lot. (Participant 1)

I think that we had some very interesting classes but I didn't know how to take advantage of those classes because although I tried, I think it was not enough because I wanted to really understand that but I had a lot of distractions that couldn't allow me to keep focused or motivated... For example, the cell phone and I don't know... that kind of thing like technology. (Participant 5)

The reason for these two participants to feel that their motivation decreased due to distractions is explained by Dörnyei and Ushioda (2011) when they mention that “the natural tendency to lose sight of the goal, to get tired or bored of the activity and to give way to attractive distractions or competing action tendencies will result in

the initial motivation gradually petering out” (p. 118). What stands out the most about this statement is the fact that Dörnyei and Ushioda conceive the act of being distracted as a natural tendency. Participant 5 mentioned that she got distracted a lot by technology, which may have happened because online classes needed technology to work out; there was a natural inclination for students to use that technology for other purposes rather than to study. Consequently, she did not pay attention to their classes. As a result, she may not have understood some topics, which made her feel that she was not learning English and started losing her motivation.

3.2.2 Lack of Social Interaction

The second reason that students mentioned regarding their low motivation during the pandemic was their lack of interaction with other people. During the interview, when I asked my participants about the factors for their low motivation during the pandemic, Participant 1 and Participant 2 answered the following:

Because I knew my classmates for almost a year at that time, like eight months and I missed them. I missed the hugs, and the laughs in the classroom so I missed them. (Participant 1)

The lack of this interaction. Because as you may know, to learn a new language, it is important to practice it, right? And when you are interacting with other partners or teachers, you are also improving your language. So those were some of the factors that demotivated me because I have to find other ways to practice English but it is not the same. (Participant 2)

As seen above, two of my participants mentioned that their low motivation was due to the lack of social interaction they had to face because of the pandemic restrictions. For instance, Participant 1 mentioned that he missed all the social aspects that face-to-face classes come with, such as being with his friends, talking to them, etcetera. Similarly, Participant 2 mentioned that since languages are social tools, in order to learn English, she needed people to communicate with, which is something that online classes did not allow to happen. As a result, her motivation decreased. This happens because even though motivation is something individual, “naturally the individual’s cognitions and perceptions may be influenced by various social and environmental factors” (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011, p. 13). Therefore, the poor social interaction that they experienced during the pandemic made it difficult for them to practice their English, and their motivation decreased.

3.2.3 Lack of Feedback

Lastly, the third reason that my participants gave for their demotivation during the pandemic was the lack of feedback that they received from their teachers. Three out

of seven of my participants agreed that the fact of not receiving effective feedback during the pandemic made them feel uncertain about their progress in learning English which consequently, demotivated them:

With online classes, a lot of the topics sometimes are not very clear... I felt a little bit lost because I don't know if I was doing everything right. (Participant 2)

There were some teachers that were rude with their comments. Or for example, you answered some questions and if you were wrong, they tend to say, “No, that’s wrong” or “You didn’t read.” And they didn’t help you to understand the topic so you were the one who missed to understand it so yeah, that was the main factor. (Participant 4)

I think that there was more homework than something that really helped me... It was more like, “Okay, you have to do this, this, and this.” But I don’t feel like I have been learning something in classes. (Participant 7)

These statements show a common belief of not being helped to understand the topics during online classes, which was one of the main factors for their low motivation. This phenomenon can be easily explained by Dörnyei and Ushioda (2011) when they mention that one of the main reasons for students’ motivation is external feedback (p. 81). For this reason, even though they were willing to learn English, their motivation suffered a huge decrease as a result of not receiving proper feedback from their teachers about their homework or the topics in general during online classes.

3.3 Motivating Factors of English Students during the Covid-19 Pandemic

Even though there were numerous reasons for the students’ lack of motivation during the pandemic, there were also some factors that encouraged students not to give up studying English. However, it was only one factor that remained constant among all my participants’ answers.

3.3.1 Intrinsic Motivation

As stated in Chapter 2, intrinsic motivation is what makes us perform a certain behavior in order to experience our own satisfaction either by doing a particular activity or satisfying our own curiosity (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011, p. 23). Most of my participants agreed that they only achieved to learn English during the pandemic due to their intrinsic motivation as Participant 2, Participant 3 and Participant 4 mention below:

I was more motivated because I wanted to learn and not because of our classes. (Participant 2)

I think that the thing that most motivated me to learn English was just the feeling of being able to use the language for my own purposes. (Participant 3)

I would say that the motivation to learn English better, and have a good performance in speaking and in order to travel abroad. (Participant 4)

These statements show a common belief shared by most of my participants as they mention that the reason for them to be motivated to keep learning English during online classes despite many problems was not extrinsic motivation but intrinsic motivation. This result is pretty similar to some studies previously mentioned in the literature review. For instance, a study conducted by Subakthiasih and Putri (2020) revealed that “the motivation to learn English that comes from inside students was higher than the motivation from outside students” (p. 126). Moreover, research carried out by Gustiani (2020) indicated that one of the main reasons for the students’ increase in their motivation is their “ambition or belief to learn and gain new knowledge” (p. 32).

In this section, I presented the findings from the data I collected during the interviews. These findings show that the opinions that students have about their motivation towards studying English online during the pandemic are that they experienced low motivation during that period of time and in contrast, their motivation when having face-to-face classes was higher by far. Furthermore, the reasons behind students’ lack of motivation were distractions that they had at home, lack of social interaction and lack of feedback. Nevertheless, what kept them motivated was their intrinsic motivation. In the next and last chapter, I state my final thoughts on this research.

Conclusions

During the Covid-19 pandemic, students’ motivation to study English online was undoubtedly affected either positively or negatively. In this research, I succeeded in answering my research questions. Hence, I was able to fulfil my aim, which was to describe how online classes have influenced English students’ motivation during the Covid-19 pandemic at a University from Pachuca. I found that students’ motivation did change during the pandemic as suggested in previous studies carried out worldwide and in Mexico (i.e. Balderas-Solís et al., 2021; Huang, Shi & Yang, 2020; Juárez-Díaz & Perales, 2021; Kamisli & Akinlar, 2022; Libreros & Schrijver, 2021). Moreover, this research provided evidence that having online classes during the pandemic decreased students’ motivation, while face-to-face classes increased their motivation. Furthermore, my studies revealed that there were many reasons for students’ demotivation during online classes, such as distractions that they had at home, lack of social interaction and lack of feedback. In contrast, there was only one factor that kept students motivated during that period of time –intrinsic motivation–. This finding was consistent with the study conducted by Libreros and Schrijver (2021) in Mexico that suggested that some

students managed emergency remote teaching due to their own motivation to do it.

The findings reported in this study expand the little existing knowledge about students’ motivation during the pandemic in Mexico, on the understanding of students’ reasons for their motivation and demotivation during that period of time. Moreover, these research findings are expected to be helpful for EFL teachers to be aware of the impact that online classes had on students’ motivation and more importantly, the reasons behind their low motivation. This way, EFL teachers can take action on facilitating ways to strengthen students’ motivation according to actual students’ opinions of the factors that generate the necessary motivation to have a good English learning process.

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