

Exploring Motivational Underpinnings of Iranian EFL Teachers from the Lens of Self-determination Theory

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Research Paper

IJEAP- 2405-2055 DOR: [20.1001.1.24763187.2024.13.2.6.3](https://doi.org/20.1001.1.24763187.2024.13.2.6.3)

Received: 2024-05-01

Accepted: 2024-06-26

Published: 2024-06-30

Abstract: In education, teacher motivation serves as the transformative force that shapes educators' well-being and influences job satisfaction, resilience, and the quality of the teaching and learning experience. This research, employing a mixed methods approach, delved into the motivational orientations of Iranian EFL teachers at public schools within the framework of self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2020). A cohort of 250 EFL teachers from public schools participated in the study, completing the Teachers' Autonomous Regulation Questionnaire. Additionally, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 20 teachers aiming to explore the extent to which their basic psychological needs (autonomy, competence, and relatedness) were met. Descriptive statistics revealed a predominant extrinsic orientation in their professional roles, with identified and integrated motives standing out within the spectrum of extrinsic motivation. Furthermore, the study unveiled varying degrees of amotivation among EFL teachers, influenced by factors such as low professional status, insufficient teaching resources, and low income. The thematic analysis underscored the neglect of essential psychological needs, particularly autonomy and competence, among EFL teachers, while the need for relatedness was partially fulfilled. The implications of this research emphasize the necessity for comprehensive strategies addressing intrinsic and extrinsic factors within the broader educational system, aimed at enhancing teacher motivation.

Keywords: Autonomy, Psychological Needs, Self-determination Theory, Self-regulation, Teachers' Motivation

Introduction

Possessing the requisite motivation to embark on the journey of teaching is a vital and foundational pillar of a teacher's career success. The assessment of a teacher's career motivation assumes paramount significance, given its far-reaching impact on numerous variables. Consequently, the selection of motivated educators, continuous evaluation of their motivation levels, concerted efforts to enhance their motivation, and the proactive safeguarding against motivation decline stand as potent strategies in advancing the overarching objectives of education (Baumert & Kunter, 2013).

Various theoretical frameworks delve into the intricacies of motivation, with one prominent theory being the Self-Determination Theory (SDT) championed by Deci and Ryan (1985, 2008; Ryan & Deci, 2020). According to SDT, individuals can harbor diverse motivations for engaging in tasks, and these motivations wield a discernible influence over their behaviors and emotions. Within the framework of SDT, motivations are categorized into distinct types based on the underlying reasons or objectives driving an individual's actions.

A fundamental distinction arises between intrinsic motivation, wherein individuals engage in activities for the sheer enjoyment they derive, and extrinsic motivation, which entails undertaking tasks for the sake of achieving a specific outcome. Research outcomes have consistently demonstrated

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variations in both experience and performance quality when individuals operate from intrinsic versus extrinsic motivations (Rahmati & Sadeghi, 2021; Dörnyei, 2007; Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011). A third category emerges as amotivation, characterized by the absence of any discernible motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

Moreover, Ryan and Deci (2000) underscored that SDT research extends beyond merely delineating the nature of positive developmental tendencies. It also scrutinizes environmental factors that can obstruct or undermine self-motivation, social functioning, and personal well-being. In essence, SDT probes not only the specifics of constructive motivational inclinations but also the social contexts that impede the realization of these propensities.

In the classroom setting, teachers undoubtedly occupy a central role, and it is imperative that their concerns and needs receive due consideration (Nosratinia & Moradi, 2017). In recent times, English teachers, akin to their counterparts in other subjects, have seen a noticeable escalation in their responsibilities compared to the past. Various research findings have underscored that teaching, across the board, ranks among the most stress-inducing professions (Aghaei & Jadidi, 2013; Afzali, 2023). Regrettably, within the field of educational psychology, scant attention has been devoted to the vital matter of teachers' motivation.

Findings from various studies have revealed a disconcerting trend within the teaching profession, with some educators departing within their very first year, while an estimated 30% opt to leave the profession after a decade (Young, 2018). The shortage of competent and dedicated educators within a school can significantly impede the teaching and learning processes.

Compounding this issue is the pervasiveness of burnout, identified as a primary factor driving educators away from their teaching careers (Madigan & Kim, 2021; Alinejad et al., 2021). Notably, the level of burnout experienced by educators is profoundly influenced by their motivation (Alexander et al., 2020; Bardach & Klassen, 2021).

Accordingly, the primary aim of the present study was to investigate the motivational orientations of Iranian EFL teachers within the framework of SDT. This research embraced a comprehensive approach, exploring a spectrum of motivators that spanned from purely extrinsic to purely intrinsic. In addition, the study was also inspired by SDT's emphasis on the satisfaction of basic psychological needs (BPN), which can contribute to higher internal regulation. It aimed to assess how well the teachers' fundamental psychological needs for *autonomy*, *competence*, and *relatedness* are met within the educational system.

Literature Review

Theoretical Framework

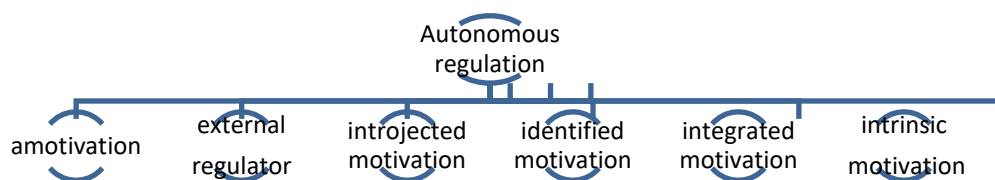
The present study has employed SDT as its foundational theoretical framework, originally formulated by Deci and Ryan in 1985. This theory aims to expound upon various forms of motivation based on the underlying reasons or objectives that drive an individual's actions. At its core, the theory distinguishes between two fundamental categories of motivation: intrinsic motivation, characterized by engagement in an activity for its inherent appeal or enjoyment, and extrinsic motivation, which entails engaging in an activity primarily for the anticipated external outcomes it may yield.

Drawing upon SDT, understanding and delineating contrasts in motivation can prove intricate due to the wide array of motivations that differ in terms of content and character (figure 1). In their work, Ryan and Deci (2020) outlined four distinct categories of external motivation. Among these, *external regulation* encompasses behaviors that are externally enforced through the promise of rewards or threat of punishments. This form of motivation is generally regarded as controlled and lacks autonomy. Additionally, *introjected regulation* can be described as the adoption of externally imposed rules that individuals accept as personal norms, often motivated by a desire to avoid feelings of guilt (Dörnyei, 2021). Introjection as a form of internal regulation, while still restrictive, motivates

individuals to act under pressure to avoid feelings of guilt or anxiety (Ryan & Deci, 2000). The third category, *identified regulation*, involves a deliberate acknowledgment of the value of an activity, resulting in a relatively high degree of personal volition and willingness to engage in it. However, the pinnacle of autonomous extrinsic motivation is termed *integrated regulation*, wherein an individual not only comprehends and identifies with the intrinsic value of the task but also aligns it seamlessly with their core interests and values. Finally, the most autonomous kind of motivation is termed *intrinsic motivation* that often arises from an individual's genuine interest, curiosity, or passion for an activity and it can be a powerful force in sustaining long-term engagement and personal growth. It is characterized by the inherent satisfaction and pleasure that the activity itself provides regardless of its utility for oneself or others. On the other hand, *amotivation*, which is defined as the lack of any motivation, is all too common in classroom settings and can result from either a lack of felt competence to perform, or lack of value or interest. Amotivation has been a strong negative predictor of engagement, learning, and wellness SDT applies as well within advanced educational contexts (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Figure 1

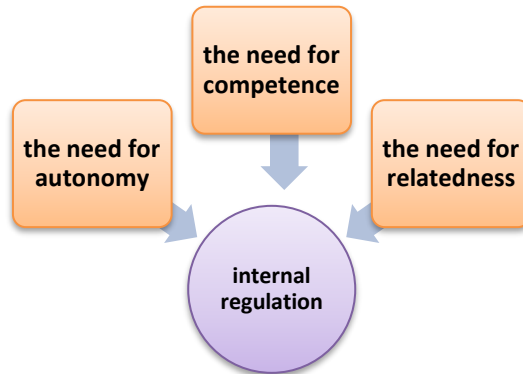
Continuum of Autonomous Regulation in SDT



Studies in SDT showed that people will feel more self-determined in doing a specific behavior to the amount that the social context supports the following fundamental human needs. (Thoonen et al., 2011; (Vansteenkiste et al., 2012); Fadaee, 2021; Jafari, & Razmjoo, 2022; Mousavi et al., 2024).

The first one is *autonomy* that is experiencing oneself as the origin of one's behavior. The need for autonomy refers to the experience of behavior as volitional and reflectively self-endorsed. For example, students are autonomous when they willingly devote time and energy to their studies irrespective of course requirements or teacher's demand. (Niemic & Ryan, 2009, Ryan & Deci, 2020; Fadaee, et al., 2021). The second need is *competence* which means feeling efficacious and having a sense of fulfillment. The need for competence refers to effectively interacting with one's environment. Teachers whose competence need is satisfied, feel that they have the capability to perform their job effectively (Lee & Nie, 2014). The last one is *relatedness* which is about the feeling attached to and close to other individuals (Deci & Ryan, 1985). The need for relatedness among teachers is fulfilled when they feel supported and connected with both their students and colleagues. (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Figure 2

Three Basic Psychological Needs

In an educational context, meeting these needs in teachers is crucial for their effective performance and well-being, as well as for shaping their teaching behaviors (Klaeijnsen et al., 2018; Praetorius et al., 2017). However, insufficient satisfaction of these needs can have negative teaching results and less optimal teaching behaviors (Marshik et al., 2017; Martinek, 2019).

Related Studies

Various studies have been undertaken to explore teachers' motivation. Generally, researchers have examined L2 teachers' motivation since 1990s. Pennington (1991) explored job satisfaction and motivation among ESL teachers using a questionnaire and found that their motivation primarily stems from intrinsic rewards and interpersonal relationships. Kassabgy et al., (2001) studied 107 EFL teachers, finding that intrinsic factors like aiding students and personal growth were more motivating than extrinsic factors such as salary or promotions. Job satisfaction stemmed largely from the meaningful aspects of their professional roles. Tziava's (2003) study on 52 Greek EFL teachers in private language schools echoed previous findings, revealing a preference for intrinsic over extrinsic motivation. Positive interactions with students, supervisors, and parents enhanced both types of motivation, while dissatisfaction arose from limited autonomy in job responsibilities and decision-making.

Yau's (2010) study on ESL teachers in New Zealand's private language schools within the framework of SDT revealed that intrinsic factors like personal enjoyment, professional challenges, and contributing to students' learning had a stronger impact on teacher motivation. Despite this, extrinsic elements such as management policies and workplace autonomy were also recognized as significant contributors to motivation. In a separate investigation, Hamedra (2018) sought to delineate the motivators for teachers. Among the factors exerting influence, he highlighted intrinsic, extrinsic, and altruistic reasons respectively, as the most crucial motivating factors. Santana-Monagas et al. (2020) focused on the role of perceived autonomy, competence and relatedness in teachers' engagement. Results indicated that teachers' BPN was related to their use of engaging messages and this was related to students' performance. Examining the teaching histories of 17 high school EFL teachers in China, Zhao (2022) delved into the reasons behind their choice of profession. He underscored the impact of social and psychological factors on the teachers' identity and dedication, offering suggestions to bolster their intrinsic motivation.

The connection between teacher and student motivation is well-established, especially through the lens of self-determination theory (SDT). Research indicates that motivated teachers employ diverse strategies to enhance student motivation. Roth et al. (2007) identified four types of motivation—external, introjected, identified, and intrinsic—confirming SDT's applicability to teacher motivation studies. Contextual factors affecting teachers' autonomy significantly influence their

motivation and, consequently, student motivation. For instance, teachers under pressure from superiors may exhibit controlling behaviors, negatively impacting students. (Pelletier et al., 2002) demonstrated how perceived work constraints and low student self-determination reduced teachers' self-determination and increased control over students. However, this was criticized for being based on lab studies; Taylor et al. (2009) sought to validate these findings in real-world settings, showing that job pressures and perceptions of student self-determination affected teachers' psychological needs and motivational strategies.

The link between teacher motivation and teaching effectiveness is particularly noteworthy, especially when considering the concept of competence within the framework of Self-Determination Theory (SDT) put forth by Ryan and Deci (2020). Research has shown that teachers' goal orientations are strong predictors of their instructional methods, as evidenced by the studies conducted by Retelsdorf and Günther (2011). Furthermore, teacher motivation shapes a variety of teaching strategies and styles, with significant contributions from the works of Han and Yin (2016) and Hein et al. (2012). Moreover, the enhancement of teaching practices is closely associated with teacher motivation, as demonstrated in Thoonen et al.'s (2011) research. This interplay underlines the importance of competence as a psychological need, suggesting that motivated teachers are more likely to engage in effective instructional practices that foster student learning.

In Iranian context, Mohammadzadeh (2007) conducted a study on the relationship between teachers' motivation for progress and their performance in high schools in Bam, Iran. The results of this research revealed a positive and significant correlation between motivation for progress and teachers' performance. Furthermore, in his study, Mousavi (2007) found a positive relationship between job satisfaction and male advancement motivation in Ahvaz schools. Similarly, Roohani et al. (2017) explored EFL teachers' motivation from an SDT perspective. The quantitative results revealed that intrinsic motivation and identified regulation were the dominant forms of motivation among the teachers. Those with high autonomous motivation emphasized the job's fruitfulness and efficacy, while participants with low autonomous motivation attributed their dissatisfaction to complex job-related issues. Ghasemzadeh et al. (2018) investigated job motivation, happiness, and the organizational atmosphere among teachers. Results showed significant variations in teacher job motivation among schools, with 62% of the differences attributed to school-level factors and 38% to individual teacher-level factors. This underscores the impact of school and organizational atmospheres on motivating teachers. Finally, Roohani et al. (2017) using SDT framework found significant links between Iranian teachers' motivation and their demographic factors such as years of experience and workplace,

A significant gap remains in understanding the various teacher motivation issues within specific contexts. It has been noted that motivating factors for teachers in developed countries can differ greatly from those in developing nations (Chivore, 1988; Yong, 1995). In developing contexts, where teachers often demonstrate more extrinsic motivation, social and economic factors play a crucial role in influencing motivation. Similarly, motivation can vary across cultures; for instance, in Chinese culture, which places a high value on education and respect for teachers, motivating factors may differ significantly from those in Western cultures that emphasize individual achievement.

Within the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in Iran, various educational environments, such as public and nongovernmental schools, contribute unique characteristics like class size, salary, facilities, and administrative policies, all of which can impact teachers' motivation differently. This variability highlights the need for separate studies focused on teachers' motivation in these distinct contexts.

An examination of the existing literature on teacher motivation reveals a notable imbalance when compared to the extensive research conducted on student motivation. Some scholars have even characterized the field of teacher motivation research as being in its early stages of development (Urdu, 2014). To address this research gap, particularly within the context of EFL education in Iran, the current study has been undertaken with the following research questions serving as its guiding framework.

Research Question One: What motivational orientations do Iranian EFL teachers exhibit in public schools according to the Self-determination Theory of motivation?

Research Question Two: To what extent are the basic psychological needs (autonomy, competence, and relatedness) of EFL teachers met within the public high schools in Iran?

Method

Participants

A purposive sampling technique, also known as purposeful or judgmental sampling (Patton, 2002), was employed in this study to select participants who met specific criteria relevant to the research objectives. The criteria for participant selection included EFL teachers working in public high schools in Iran.

The researcher aimed to achieve a diverse and representative sample in terms of demographic variables such as gender, experience level, and educational background. In fact, EFL high school teachers are connected through several Telegram and WhatsApp groups at both provincial and national levels, enabling us to reach a broad audience via social media. Participation in this study was entirely voluntary, resulting in the completion of the TAR questionnaire by over 250 teachers from various regions across the country. The demographic information collected is summarized in Table 1.

Table 1

Distribution of the Participants in Terms of Age, Gender, Teaching Experience, and Educational Qualifications

		Frequency	Percentage
Age Group	20-30 years	92	36.8
	31-40 years	84	33.6
	41-50 years	51	20.4
	51 years or above	23	9.2
Gender	Male	164	65.6
	Female	86	34.4
Teaching Experience	Less than 1 year	34	13.6
	1-5 years	68	27.2
	6-10 years	64	25.6
	More than 10 years	84	33.6
Educational Qualifications	Bachelor's degree	145	58.0
	Master's degree	100	40.0
	Doctorate degree	5	16.4
	Total	250	100.0

The decision to have a sample size of 250 was based on practical considerations, such as the time available for data collection and analysis, as well as ensuring an adequate number of participants to generate meaningful findings (Guest et al., 2006). Voluntary participation was emphasized to maintain ethical standards and respect for the participants. Furthermore, voluntary participation helped ensure that the participants were interested in the research topic, which could enhance the quality of data collected (Ortiz & Greene, 2007).

To gather qualitative data for in-depth analysis, we conducted interviews with a sample of 20 EFL teachers. The selection of participants was based on availability sampling, which allowed us to conveniently access educators who were willing and able to share their insights in a timely manner. The number of participants was intentionally limited to ensure a more thorough exploration of each

teacher's experiences and perspectives regarding their BPN. By focusing on a smaller group, we could delve deeper into the nuances of their responses, facilitating richer and more detailed discussions.

Instruments

The data collection tools utilized in this study included a Teachers' Autonomous Regulation Questionnaire (TAR) and a semi-structured interview to assess satisfaction of the three BPN.

TAR Questionnaire

Following the exploratory sequential methodology outlined by Creswell and Creswell (2017), a questionnaire was developed by the researcher to assess the motivational orientation of EFL teachers. This sequential design strategy posits that qualitative insights guide the formulation of the questionnaire.

The questionnaire was designed to assess the motivational orientations of EFL teachers (See Appendix). It consisted of 18 items that were further divided into six subscales within SDT framework: amotivation, external regulation, introjected regulation, identified regulation, integrated regulation, and intrinsic motivation. Prior to the development of the items, interviews with a number of practicing teachers about how contextual factors in the system impact their motivation was carried out. Valuable information obtained from the interviews informed the development of more context-embedded and relevant items in the questionnaire. Afterward, the questionnaire items were reviewed by two TEFL experts in terms of conceptual compatibility with SDT categories. Some professional comments were made and they were taken into account in the final versions. Next, a pilot study with 35 teachers was carried out to ensure the tools' reliability as displayed in Table 2.

Table 2

Results of the Reliability Analysis of TAR Questionnaire based on DeVellis' (2017) Guideline

Questionnaire	Components	N of Items	N of Sample	Cronbach's Alpha	Interpretation	
Autonomous Regulation	Amotivation	3	35	.738	Acceptable	
	External Regulation	3	35	.829	Good	
	Introjected Regulation	3	35	.798	Acceptable	
	Identified Regulation	3	35	.835	Good	
	Integrated Regulation	3	35	.821	Good	
	Intrinsic Motivation	3	35	.792	Acceptable	
	Total averaged reliability		18	35	.802	Good

Semi-structured Interview

The second research question in the present study aimed to assess the level of satisfaction of EFL teachers' BPN within the public-school system in Iran. Drawing upon SDT, the investigation focused on three fundamental psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. The research methodology involved the development of questions for semi-structured interviews, informed by initial informal discussions with several teachers to gain insight into their experiences within the educational system. This preliminary phase aimed to provide the researcher with a comprehensive understanding of the context.

The survey instrument included open-ended questions that delved into teachers' concerns, aspirations, daily routines, and overall experiences in schools. The questions about the basic needs revolved around some relevant themes as presented in table 3.

Table 3

Subthemes Related to BPN

BPN	Subthemes
Autonomy	1. Material selection 2. Teaching methodology 3. Assessment processes 4. In-service training 5. Choice of school assignment and teaching levels
Competence	1. Professional growth and development 2. Feedback and evaluation system 3. Access to resources and technology 4. Engaging in research-based activities 5. Developing language skills 6. Teaching contents
Relatedness	1. Collaborative professional development 2. Social Events and Gatherings 3. Teacher-Students' Bond 4. Teacher-Parents' Bond 5. Teacher-Administrators' Bond

BPN = Basic Psychological Needs

Procedures

Following the development of data collection tools, the online TAR Questionnaire was shared with a larger population of EFL teachers in public high schools in Iran through platforms like WhatsApp, Telegram, and email. Over 250 responses were collected securely in an online database for subsequent analysis, ensuring privacy and confidentiality. Once the data collection phase concluded, statistical methods were applied to analyze the gathered responses.

Subsequently, main interviews were conducted with a sample of 20 teachers, chosen through the availability sampling method. These interviews took place in person or through the online platform Google Meet, accommodating the preferences of the participating teachers and fostering a relaxed atmosphere by conducting them in Persian, the teachers' L1.

Due to teachers' reluctance to voice recording and their preference for anonymity, meticulous notes were taken during interviews. Critical points were summarized immediately after each session, with verbalized summaries verified by interviewees to ensure accuracy. Ethical considerations were paramount, with participants informed about the study's purpose, procedures, voluntary participation, and the confidentiality of their responses.

Data Analysis

The acquired dataset from the questionnaire underwent robust analysis using SPSS Version 26. Descriptive statistics, such as mean and standard deviation, were applied to unveil motivational orientations in EFL teachers. Thematic deductive analysis of the semi-structured interviews with 20 educators focused on evaluating the fulfillment of BPN—autonomy, competence, and relatedness. This analysis was based on the main themes and subthemes previously explored and displayed in Table 3. Detailed notes, rather than recorded interviews, formed the basis for analysis, cross-verified with the participants to rectify potential misinterpretations. A meticulous process identified themes using a coding scheme, validated by experienced teachers. A meticulous process utilizing open coding was used to discover the extent to which the participating teachers perceived their need for BPN as satisfied in the system.

The level of satisfaction was assessed using a qualitative approach. To avoid a reductionist binary evaluation of the extent to which teachers' basic psychological needs were met, the researcher

adopted a three-level classification system. This framework allowed for a more nuanced understanding of participants' attitudes towards this issue. Importantly, to minimize subjective interpretations, qualitative indicators were operationally defined for use in the coding process. These indicators were developed and refined progressively throughout the interviews as new insights emerged from the participants. Additionally, the indicators underwent review and discussion with knowledgeable and invested colleagues to ensure their reliability and validity.

The satisfaction level was categorized as low, moderate, or high based on the following qualitative indicators:

- **Low Satisfaction:** This level is characterized by participants' significant dissatisfaction or frustration with the fulfillment of their psychological needs. Descriptions typically include feelings of neglect, lack of support, or negative experiences.
- **Moderate Satisfaction:** This level is indicated when participants report mixed experiences, with some psychological needs being met while others are not. Responses at this level contain a balance of positive and negative comments.
- **High Satisfaction:** This level is identified when participants frequently mention positive experiences, feeling well-supported, and overall contentment with the fulfillment of their psychological needs.

This methodological rigor aimed to ensure the credibility and authenticity of insights, minimizing potential biases like the Hawthorne effect.

Results

Descriptive Statistics for the EFL Teachers' Autonomous Regulation

This section presents the results of descriptive statistics for the EFL teachers' autonomous regulation. It focuses on six categories of the questionnaire namely, amotivation, external regulation, introjected regulation, identified regulation, integrated regulation, and intrinsic motivation. The teachers were asked to rate how much they agreed or disagreed with each statement using a five-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5). Thus, the minimum and maximum mean ratings were from 1 to 5 points.

Table 4 presents the descriptive statistics for the teachers' total autonomous regulation, which reflects their motivation orientation as indicated by their ratings on six types of motivations.

Table 4

Descriptive Statistics for the EFL Teachers' Motivational Regulations

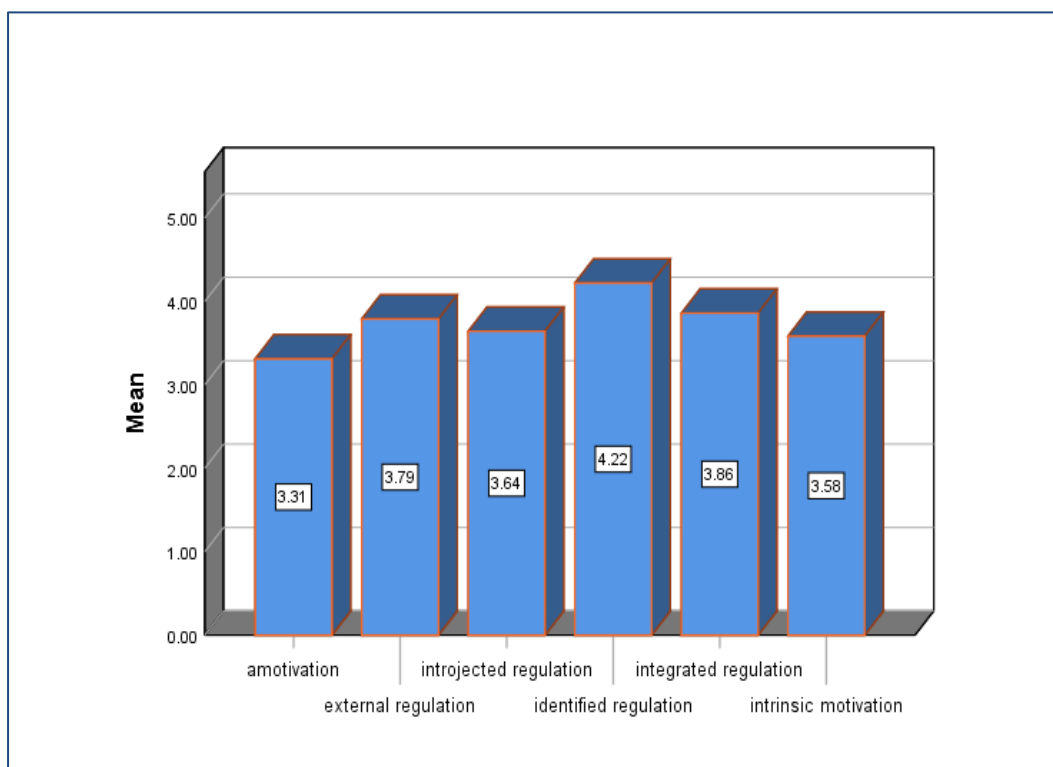
	amotivation	external regulation	introjected regulation	identified regulation	integrated regulation	intrinsic motivation
N Valid	250	250	250	250	250	250
Missing	0	0	0	0	0	0
Mean	3.31	3.78	3.64	4.22	3.86	3.58
Std. Deviation	1.06	.74	.66	.61	.80	.88
Minimum	1.00	2.00	2.33	2.33	2.00	1.67
Maximum	5.00	5.00	5.00	5.00	5.00	5.00
Sum	828.00	947.33	910.67	1055.00	965.00	895.67

Based on the results, identified regulation received the highest mean score of 4.22, indicating that EFL teachers strongly believed that teaching English in schools helped improve their language skills and considered it an honorable profession. This suggested that their motivation was driven by a deep personal value and recognition of the importance of teaching English. Integrated regulation received

the second highest mean score of 3.86, suggesting that EFL teachers viewed teaching English as an integral part of their professional identity. The motivation in this category was connected to their sense of purpose and the societal value they placed on being English teachers. External regulation received a mean score of 3.78, indicating that EFL teachers acknowledged the financial importance of teaching English as a source of income. Their motivation in this category was related to external factors such as financial stability and job security. Introjected regulation received a mean score of 3.64. This meant that external pressures such as feelings of empathy for the students partly influenced EFL teachers' motivation. Intrinsic motivation received a mean score of 3.58. This indicated that EFL teachers had a great passion for teaching English. Their motivation was also derived from an internal desire to teach. Finally, amotivation received a relatively less, yet noticeable, mean score of 3.31, indicating that some EFL teachers felt demotivated due to factors such as the lack of importance given to English teaching as a profession and challenges within the education system. Figure 1 displays teachers' different types of autonomous regulation.

Figure 3

Teachers' Different Types of Regulation



Thematic Analysis of BPN

The thematic analysis of interview summaries regarding satisfaction of the three basic psychological needs in SDT which include *autonomy, competence and relatedness* are presented as follows:

Autonomy Satisfaction

The analysis revealed key areas where teachers were able to exercise autonomy, encompassing the following themes:

Materials Selection: In Iran's standardized education system, teachers must adhere to the uniform *Prospects* and *Vision* series for EFL in Junior and Senior high schools, following Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) principles. However, the centralized decision-making process in the series development excludes practicing teachers.

T3: *It's disheartening that our insights were not taken into consideration in developing contents for the books we teach.*

Teaching Methodology: In Iran's educational landscape, the prescribed curriculum currently advocates for the utilization of the CLT and provides teachers with a teaching manual as a guideline. However, a significant degree of flexibility characterizes the pedagogical methods employed by educators.

T10: *Factors like student proficiency, motivation, technology availability, time constraints, and the assessment system collectively shape our instructional methods.*

Notably, the absence of stringent supervision allows for considerable autonomy. As long as no grievances are expressed by students or parents, teaching methodologies are assumed effective.

Assessment Processes: In high schools across Iran, teachers actively engage in assessing students, seamlessly integrating assessments into daily routines.

T15: *We have the freedom to establish criteria for in-class activities and participation, providing us with a substantial degree of autonomy in the informal evaluation process.*

Conversely, in formal assessments, particularly the centrally constructed national year-end exams, teachers are not involved. The development and administration of these assessments occur at a higher administrative level.

A prevalent concern among educators is the perceived bias in school principals, wherein low student scores may be unfavorably interpreted as a reflection of inefficiency in school management from an administrative standpoint. Furthermore, external pressures on teachers to inflate scores for some students who possess influential connections limit their assessment autonomy.

In-Service Training: Decisions regarding in-service training programs in Iran are typically formulated by administrators in collaboration with head teachers, limiting negotiation scope on content and frequency.

T10: *The content sometimes extends beyond English language instruction, encompassing cultural and religious components that may not resonate well with us.*

Attendance at these sessions is often mandatory, driven by the potential impact on career progression rather than teachers' voluntary participation.

Choice of School Assignment and /or Selection of Teaching Level: Teachers annually grapple with crucial decisions regarding school placement and grade assignment, shaped by factors like demand, experience, gender, education, principals' satisfaction, and personal connections. This leads to restricted autonomy, particularly when teachers find themselves assigned to teach less-preferred, out-of-field subjects.

T12: *Every year, we hope for a say in our assignments, but the reality is often different. The factors influencing the decisions are beyond our control.*

Table 5 summarizes the extent to which the participants' need for autonomy is met in public schools.

Table 5

Satisfaction of the Need for Autonomy

Main theme	Subthemes	Satisfaction level
Autonomy	1. Material selection	Low
	2. Teaching methodology	Moderate
	3. Assessment processes	Moderate
	4. In-service training	Low
	5. Choice of school assignment and teaching levels	Low

Competence Satisfaction

The results of interviews with 30 EFL teachers at Iranian high schools about the extent to which their need for competence has been fulfilled yielded the following results.

Professional Growth and Development of Practicing Teachers: Teachers in this study conveyed mixed feelings. Despite the system implementing growth plans, such as in-service programs and competitions, like creative lesson plan writing, interviewees found them lacking in both quantity and quality. Awards were limited, and their monetary value was considered inadequate.

T9: *There's just not enough motivation for us to grow professionally. The system talks about incentives, but they're scarce and hardly make a difference.*

Moreover, teachers' efforts to pursue higher education receive minimal support from the system.

Feedback and Evaluation Systems: The Ministry of Education introduced a teacher ranking system, focusing on competencies like teaching experience and innovation, initially approved by educators. Yet, concerns arise due to a perceived lack of transparency in evaluation criteria, creating discontent among teachers.

T15: *A lot of us were initially hopeful about the new teacher ranking system, but there's still skepticism. The criteria for evaluation are unclear and sometimes unfair.*

Access to Resources and Technology: Language instruction requires modern audio-visual aids. While private schools embrace smart technology, public schools, limited by budgets, struggle to provide necessary technological resources. Video projection and computer facilities are either unavailable or not in optimal condition.

T14: *Because of the outdated technology, we end up giving low-quality education, and it makes us teachers feel incompetent and ineffective. We need better tools to do our jobs properly.*

Incorporation of Research-Based Practices: Within the educational domain, teachers hold the potential to engage in research-oriented activities. However, the existing environment provides minimal encouragement or guidance for practicing teachers to initiate research endeavors, either individually or collaboratively.

T7: *Many teachers feel that the challenges of conducting research and publishing papers outweigh the rewards in terms of knowledge gain or promotion within the education system.*

Developing Language Skills: Language teachers must actively practice all four language skills—listening, speaking, reading, and writing—to maintain and improve their own proficiency. This aspect of competence is often overlooked but is crucial for language teachers to cultivate and feel confident about.

T19: *Teachers in our schools face a real struggle to enhance or maintain their language skills. The classes don't offer the challenge needed for improvement, and the in-service training system doesn't take any action to support us in this regard.*

T13: *As so many students in public schools are poor in English, they demand English lessons to be presented in L1. Scant use of the target language in English classes has negative consequences both for the students and the teachers themselves.*

On the other hand, a prevailing concern articulated by some educators was the perceived lack of earnestness among students in their engagement with school English, attributing this phenomenon to the parallel enrollment in language institutes. These institutes were noted for providing more refined, specialized educational services, particularly in the domains of speaking and pronunciation.

Teaching Contents: While there is a positive shift in teaching materials, with enhanced design and integration of language skills, the infrequent updates, like the decade-long use of English books, hinder professional growth. The current system lacks extracurricular content, impacting teacher competence and overall progress.

T11: *I think the new books we're using at school are way better. They're not just about grammar and reading anymore. However, teaching the same book over and over again would reduce one's interest in its content, and there is no challenge in reading or teaching it again.*

Table 6 summarizes the extent to which the participants' need for competence is satisfied in public schools.

Table 6

Satisfaction of the Need for Competence

Main theme	Subthemes	Satisfaction level
Competence	1. Professional growth and development	Low
	2. Feedback and evaluation system	Low
	3. Access to resources and technology	Low
	4. Engaging in research-based activities	Low
	5. Developing language skills	Low
	6. Teaching contents	Moderate

Relatedness Satisfaction

Fulfilling the relatedness imperative in Iranian EFL teaching involves building connections, supportive relationships, and a sense of belonging.

Collaborative Professional Development: Encouraging collaborative professional development is often limited to webinars, with an emphasis on cost-effectiveness and convenience, although they often lack interactivity. Educators widely utilize social media platforms like WhatsApp or Telegram for dynamic exchanges, but the absence of regular in-person meetings is perceived as a significant limitation, hindering meaningful idea exchange and support from head teachers.

T2: *I find webinars quite accessible, especially with our busy schedules. It's a cost-effective way to stay updated with new teaching methodologies... While webinars are convenient, they sometimes feel one-sided. We are passive attendees, and the interaction is limited.*

T20: *Social media discussions cover education topics, but the depth of face-to-face interactions is irreplaceable, challenging meaningful connections through virtual platforms.*

Social Events and Gatherings: Teachers note a limited presence of social events in education, mainly tied to special occasions like Teachers' Day, Students' Day, or politically influenced occasions. However, structured meetings to appreciate teachers' efforts or organize enjoyable social events are evidently lacking.

T16: *One idea I have is that we need more regular and friendly get-togethers for teachers. Creating a fun environment could help us unwind and strengthen our connections as a teaching community.*

Teacher-Student Bond: Teacher-student dynamics vary based on personalities, typically maintaining a formal tone. While socializing outside class is rare, most teachers foster kind relationships within the classroom.

T5: *While maintaining professionalism, I believe in creating a positive and supportive atmosphere in the classroom. It's crucial for students to feel comfortable and valued.*

Teacher-Parent Bond: The connection between students' parents and teachers is typically limited to once or twice a year, usually following semester exams when parents are invited to school to receive their children's scores and have the opportunity to meet with teachers if necessary.

T15: *We hardly ever meet parents. It seems like teenagers don't really want their parents involved in their school lessons.*

Teacher-Administrator Bond: The relationship between teachers and school administrators tends to be formal and limited in nature. Even outside of scheduled classes and breaks, there is minimal interaction between the two groups, and informal discussions are infrequent.

Table 7 summarizes the extent to which the participants' need for relatedness is satisfied in public schools.

Table 7

Satisfaction of the Need for Relatedness

Main theme	Subthemes	Satisfaction level
Relatedness	1. Collaborative professional development	Moderate
	2. Social Events and Gatherings	
	3. Teacher-Students' Bond	Low
	4. Teacher-Parents' Bond	Moderate
	5. Teacher-Administrators' Bond	Low
		Moderate

Discussion

Discussion of Motivational Orientations

The study reveals that amotivation among EFL teachers in public schools is moderately influenced by factors like insufficient support, educational resource inadequacies, and diverse student capabilities. This aligns with previous research (Salifu, 2014; Busingye, 2016) emphasizing the impact of teaching resources on teacher motivation and the importance of professional recognition (Day & Gu, 2010). Interestingly, teachers downplayed the significance of class heterogeneity, consistent with studies (Mercer, 2011) suggesting student characteristics may not be the primary source of amotivation. This perception may stem from teacher-centric methods, emphasizing presentations and limiting interaction, potentially masking cognitive challenges in mixed-ability classes (Heng et al., 2023).

Two noteworthy considerations merit attention in this context. Firstly, it is imperative to acknowledge that deficiencies in the aforementioned domains are not asserted as categorical certainties. The degree to which respondents substantiate these assertions lends credence to the existence of these challenges within their professional landscape, without absolute certainty. Additionally, it is crucial to recognize that any lapses in the pertinent facets of education may serve as demotivating elements, potentially resulting in a decrement of motivation rather than precipitating a shift towards a state of amotivation or complete lack of motivation.

The descriptive statistics unveiled the role of *external regulation* in motivating EFL teachers within Iranian high school settings. A significant proportion of teachers identified income as a pivotal motivator for their professional engagement, aligning with extant research emphasizing the sway of

financial considerations on teacher motivation (Stirling, 2016). Additionally, job security and adherence to educational policies emerged as crucial motivators for EFL teachers, corroborating prior studies that underscore the impact of external regulations on teacher motivation (Börü, 2018).

In terms of *introjected regulation*, internal pressures played a role in EFL teachers' decisions to persist in teaching English. Notably, teachers demonstrated higher motivation when linked to their concern for students, aligning with research emphasizing the importance of teacher-student relationships and empathy (Gann, 2020). Regarding *identified regulation*, which gauges teachers' personal value in teaching, the findings indicate a noticeably high level among EFL teachers. Their conviction arises from the belief that teaching English enhances their language proficiency, is an honor, and aligns with their core values, resonating with previous research (Barni et al., 2019). This consistency aligns with studies emphasizing the positive impact of identified regulation on teachers' well-being and commitment (Basikin, 2020).

As for *Integrated Regulation*, reflecting the degree to which teachers integrate teaching English into their identity and professional existence, the majority of EFL teachers exhibit a high level of integrated regulation. They perceive teaching English as an integral part of their professional identity, emphasizing its elevated social value in the education system. This strong connection between their professional role and personal identity aligns with research suggesting that a robust professional identity enhances teachers' motivation and job satisfaction (Fathi et al., 2023).

Ultimately, the results revealed a moderate level of *Intrinsic Motivation* among the teachers, underscoring their genuine passion for the profession. Simply put, sustaining morale in a career relies on the presence of intrinsic motivation as opposed to relying solely on extrinsic factors. The significance of intrinsic motivation in this study lends support to earlier research, such as Pennington (1991) and Zhao (2022).

Discussion Concerning Satisfaction of the BPN

The results of this study bring attention to the observation that teachers experience frustration with their psychological need for autonomy, leading to passivity and diminished intrinsic motivation. This observation supports the argument that factors like role ambiguity, high-stakes testing, external oversight, and authoritative school leadership, as revealed by studies on teachers' autonomous motivation, can undermine their sense of autonomy. (Reeve & Su, 2014; Yuan & Zhang, 2017, Fadaee et al., 2021).

Competence is vital for professional growth, but the interviewed participants rated the system below average in supporting this need. Ineffective in-service training, limited acknowledgment of teachers' efforts, a lack of robust feedback, and challenges in accessing resources contribute to a diminished sense of competence. The absence of adequate encouragement for research and language skill development, along with stagnation in instructional materials, further undermines perceived competence. These challenges underscore the need to address competence-related issues for a motivated and satisfied teaching community consistent with Rahmaty and Sadeghy (2021).

Issues connected to satisfaction of relatedness needs among EFL teachers in Iranian public schools significantly impact motivation. Positive teacher-student relationships exist but are selective, with disinterested students often lacking such connections. The absence of regular meetings and face-to-face interactions hampers collaborative professional development. Formal relationships among teachers, administrators, and colleagues hinder collaborative dialogue. The results of this study also align with Dörnyei and Ushioda (2011) who emphasized the impact of contextual factors at both micro and macro levels on teacher's motivation. Moreover, various studies indicate that among all factors influencing happiness, relatedness consistently ranks at or very near the top of the list (Argyle, 1987; DeNeve, 1999, Jafari, & Razmjoo, 2022; Mousavi et al., 2024). In a similar vein, Cowie (2011) emphasized the motivational effect of colleague relationships, while Hiver, et.al. (2018) and Erkaya (2012), highlighted negative effects on teacher motivation due to unsupportive colleagues.

Conclusion and Implications

The research on EFL teachers in Iranian public schools, framed within SDT theory, reveals that identified regulation holds the highest mean score. EFL teachers strongly believe in the intrinsic value of teaching English, associating it with skill enhancement and honor. Integrated regulation follows, indicating a sense of purpose and societal value. External regulation is notable, highlighting financial importance. Introjected regulation suggests external pressures influence motivation moderately. Intrinsic motivation, slightly lower, implies a significant passion for teaching. Amotivation in the participants indicates dissatisfaction, linked to income and perceived inadequacy in meeting basic psychological needs.

Pedagogical implications within SDT involve enhancing professional identity and competence for EFL teachers. Teacher training should prioritize relatedness through collaborative learning and mentorship. Fair compensation is crucial, given the impact of financial factors on motivation. To address autonomy gaps, a shift towards bottom-up feedback and collaborative decision-making is needed. Well-being initiatives, grounded in SDT, should extend beyond curricular events, encompassing professional growth and positive relationships, fostering a balanced work-life for EFL teachers.

For developing countries like Iran, the insights gleaned from teachers' interviews in this study underscore the critical importance of external motivators, such as stable income and job security, for the well-being and overall motivation of educators. These factors are essential not only for meeting survival needs as articulated by Maslow (1965) but also for enabling teachers to perform effectively in their roles. As a result, it is crucial to recognize the significant impact of these external regulators on teachers' motivation, which may challenge the principles of SDT emphasizing development of internal regulators through satisfaction of basic psychological needs.

While the research provides valuable insights into EFL teacher motivation in Iranian public schools, certain considerations should be acknowledged. The primarily descriptive and product-oriented research design offers a snapshot but lacks a dynamic view of motivational trajectories. Reliance on questionnaires and interviews may introduce subjectivity and response bias, and the absence of observational data limits verification.

Building on the findings regarding EFL teacher motivation in Iranian public schools, several key areas warrant further research. Future studies should employ dynamic methodologies, such as longitudinal designs, to capture the evolving nature of teacher motivation over time, providing insights into motivational trajectories and shifts in attitudes (Hiver et al., 2018). Additionally, incorporating observational data would enhance the reliability of findings by offering objective measures of classroom practices, thus addressing potential biases in self-reported data. It is also essential to explore contextual variations among different schools and regions in Iran, analyzing how demographic factors and institutional cultures shape teachers' experiences. Future research should also focus on designing interventions that enhance teacher autonomy through professional development programs, enabling educators to make informed decisions about their instructional methods. Additionally, investigating the effects of collaborative teaching models and peer support networks could help foster a sense of relatedness among teachers, thereby boosting motivation. Researchers may also examine how instructional leadership practices and school climates can be optimized to promote teachers' sense of competence, potentially leading to better teaching outcomes. Collectively, these research avenues are critical for developing a more nuanced understanding of teacher motivation in Iranian context.

Acknowledgements

I extend heartfelt appreciation to all who played a pivotal role in the project's success, especially dedicated educators, head teachers, and colleagues for their active contribution to data collection,

enriching the study's quality. Special thanks to Dr. Omalbanin Moosazadeh for expert guidance on statistical procedures.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

I have no conflict of interests to disclose.

Funding Details

This research did not receive any funding from any agency.

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Appendix: Teachers' Autonomous Regulation (TAR) Questionnaire

Instruction: Please specify the extent to which you agree with the following statements from 1= the least agreement to 5 = the most agreement.

Motivational
Orientation

Amotivation	1. We do not receive enough support from administrators. 2. The educational resources are poor and inadequate. 3. The students are diverse in their abilities and lack the motivation to learn English.
External regulation	4. Teaching English at school is my vital source of income. 5. To safeguard my job, I have to comply with the system's rules and regulations. 6. English teaching provides an opportunity for private classes as extra income.
Introjected Regulation	7. I continue teaching English to please my family. 8. I am motivated to perform well because I care about my students. 9. I do my best as a teacher so that the school principal is satisfied and respected by top administrators.
Identified Regulation	10. Teaching English improves my language skills, which is important to me. 11. Teaching English is an honor because it is the most important international language. 12. Teaching English introduces a new world and is appealing to me.
Integrated Regulation	13. Teaching English has become part of my professional identity and existence, and I can never give it up. 14. Teaching English in the education system is of high social value to me. 15. I feel that my existence is closely linked to teaching English in schools.
Intrinsic Motivation	16. I am passionate about and enjoy teaching English. 17. I feel great joy while teaching English at schools. 18. I am willing to teach English in schools even without pay or for a small fee.

Note: the format for the administration of this questionnaire changed by shuffling the items, removing the column on the left and adding options from 1 to 5 on the Likert scale.