Improving Motivation in Japanese University EFL Classes: Strategies for At-Risk Repeater Students

Lidija Elliott[1]

[1]Kwansei Gakuin University, Japan

Abstract

This study investigates the motivation and learning behaviors of 55 university students who failed the required English Communication course and subsequently enrolled in a repeater class. To identify effective motivational strategies, the study employs a sixteen-item qualitative questionnaire. The results indicated five key approaches: culturally responsive teaching, adapting instruction to learners' interests, integrating technology such as language-learning applications, fostering a supportive classroom environment, and setting personalized, career-relevant goals to enhance self-efficacy. The implementation of these strategies has the potential to improve learning outcomes and reduce dropout rates.

Keywords: at-risk students, motivation, teaching strategies, English communication class

[1] Kwansei Gakuin University, Japan
Email:
Hyo78685@kwansei.ac.jp

Introduction

Enhancing student engagement and learning remains a persistent challenge for educators. This study focuses on at-risk repeater students, meaning learners who have previously failed the mandatory English courses and are required to retake them. An at-risk student is one who is at risk of not meeting academic or social expectations or of not graduating (Slavin&Madden, 1989). These students face various challenges, from limited exposure to English to cultural and linguistic differences which can make traditional teaching methods less effective (Huang & Chalmers, 2023). In this context, many students in repeater classes are also student-athletes or active members of university sports clubs, which places additional demands on their time and affects their ability to engage consistently in English coursework. As Dörnyei (2005) emphasized, without sufficient motivation, even individuals with remarkable abilities cannot accomplish long-term goals, and neither are appropriate curricula and good teaching, on their own, enough to ensure student achievement (p. 65). Motivating university-level EFL students involves a mix of psychological, sociological, and linguistic factors (Dörnyei, 1998, 2010a). In repeaters' courses, learners are often unmotivated and reluctant to learn. Many students in the repeater class ask how many classes they can miss during the semester and still pass, reflecting low intrinsic motivation and engagement. Therefore, teachers should implement strategies to overcome motivational, personal, and learning challenges, making English proficiency appealing, engaging, relevant, and supportive.

Despite research on general motivational strategies in EFL classrooms, few studies focus specifically on at-risk repeater students at Japanese universities who have previously failed required English courses and who may also be balancing athletic commitments. This study addresses this gap by examining motivational strategies from both teacher and student perspectives, aiming to identify effective approaches for fostering engagement and improving outcomes in repeater classes.

Literature Review

Studies from the early 2000s (Jolly, 2008; Melendez, 2007) suggest that student- athletes have a higher risk of academic failure than other students because of the time needed for training and competitions. Such demands may overwhelm student-athletes with stress. Academic failure may

also occur because student athletes lack study skills, self-regulation strategies (Thompson & Geren, 2002), and self-management abilities (Tang & Wong, 2014). Because many participants in this study were student-athletes, previous research on student-athlete academic risk is relevant to understanding their motivational profiles. Balancing sports and study is challenging for student-athletes. Omar-Fauzee et al. (2014) report that confidence and goal setting also have a moderately high correlation with coping with adversity. Thus, if student-athlete has high confidence and set effective goal, their ability to cope with adversity is higher.

Several studies have found that motivation is crucial to successful foreign language learning (e.g., Gardner, 1985; Chen, Warden, & Chang, 2005; Nishida, 2012c). Therefore, it is important to create a supportive environment that encourages effort and peer collaboration. External motivations, such as job prospects, often dominate. However, connecting English study to personal interests can enhance motivation to study.

Later research emphasizes the role teachers play and the importance of the classroom environment in student motivation. According to Dörnyei (2001a), most teachers who consider their students' long-term development recognize the importance of enhancing motivation and sustaining their goal-oriented behavior. Sugita McEown & Takeuchi (2014) wrote that motivational strategies used by university EFL instructors in Japan were effective. Strategies that focused on creating a positive atmosphere, such as humor, offering praise, and showing enthusiasm, were more successful in motivating students. These findings highlight the importance of aligning motivational techniques with students' cultural and psychological readiness. Williamson & Blackburn (2024) stated students are motivated differently. Therefore, not all methods are effective for every student at all times.

Research Questions

This research seeks to inform educators on how to motivate and sustain at-risk EFL learners, centering on two research questions:

RQ 1: How can teachers effectively motivate at-risk language learners?

RQ 2: What strategies can universities and teachers implement to maintain the motivation of at-risk language learners over time?

Methodology

Participants & Setting

The study involved 55 non-English majors at a Japanese university, most of whom were athletes. Participants were required to enroll in the repeater course as part of their academic progress, but their participation in the study was voluntary. Students were informed that their data would remain confidential and that participation would not influence course grades. Instruction was delivered once a week in 100-minute classes. Data from students who did not provide consent were excluded. The study was conducted from spring 2023 to fall 2025.

Data Collection

A qualitative survey design was used to explore learners' experiences and beliefs about motivation. The data collection tool was a 16-item English-language questionnaire (see APPENDIX A) that addressed participants' backgrounds, perceptions of communication ability, and beliefs about learning. The questionnaire was completed at the start of each semester. Students' responses were analyzed qualitatively to identify common themes about motivation, engagement, and perceived challenges.

Results

Participants were 55% female, 44% male, and 1% identified as other. 90% of participants reported starting to study English in elementary school. Many students were also studying a second foreign language, with Chinese and Spanish being the most common, 39% and 20%, respectively.

Students reported significantly higher confidence in their Japanese skills than in their English skills. 90% felt confident or extremely confident in Japanese, while only 10% expressed the same level of confidence in speaking English. Motivation levels varied: 37% of participants were extremely motivated, 42% somewhat motivated, 16% not very motivated, and 5% not motivated at all.

Importance of English for future career (Q8): 82% reported that English was important or very important for their future career, 10% reported it was somewhat important, and 8% selected "other" or were unsure.

Culturally responsive teaching (Q9): 71% of students agreed that lessons including Japanese examples or culture made learning more engaging, 15% were neutral, and 14% disagreed. Relevance to hobbies (Q10): 65% agreed that connecting English learning to hobbies such as anime or J-pop increased interest, 20% were neutral, and 15% disagreed.

Choice of activities (Q11): 78% reported they learn better when allowed to choose activities (e.g., games, reading), 15% were unsure, and 7% said they did not benefit from choice.

Group work (Q12): 62% felt that group work with friends helped them practice English, 25% were neutral, and 13% disagreed. Among the responses were comments such as: "I am relaxed when I work with friends" [Koharu], and "It's fun to be with friend" [Kojiro].

Positive feedback (Q13): 84% indicated that positive feedback from teachers increased their motivation, 10% were neutral, and 6% reported no effect. Haruku said: "When my teacher say Great, I feel good".

Overall, the survey results indicated that repeaters benefit most from activities that build confidence, provide structured yet flexible learning opportunities, and foster a supportive environment with constructive feedback. These findings suggest that students' motivation is shaped by both instructional content and the methods and environment in which learning occurs. To directly apply these findings in the classroom, educators might consider incorporating sample activities such as 'Role-play Scenarios for Real-life Conversations,' where students practice dialogues in everyday situations, helping them build confidence and fluency. Another effective activity could be the 'Choose Your Adventure Reading Session,' where learners read different endings of a story based on their preferences, promoting engagement through choice and encouraging flexible thinking.

Strategies for Motivating Repeaters Course

Teaching English to Japanese university students presents significant challenges. Many students exhibit low motivation, may hold negative attitudes toward English learning, and often fail to recognize the benefits of English proficiency. Effective strategies for motivating EFL learners typically involve a combination of multiple approaches.

Culturally Responsive Teaching

Teachers should understand students' cultural backgrounds and foster an inclusive environment by incorporating materials that reflect students' cultures to enhance motivation (Jackson-Barrett, 2021). Adapting teaching styles to align with both school culture and students' cultural learning preferences can maximize learning outcomes (Hammond, 2017). In language-learning contexts, this involves increasing engagement through storytelling and by including content related to students' diverse histories and popular cultures. Instructors should gradually build upon Japanese communication styles to ensure students feel comfortable in the EFL classroom.

Differentiated Instruction

This is a teaching approach in which teachers identify individual student differences and tailor their methods and materials to meet each student's learning abilities, styles, paces, and needs. This may include texts of varying difficulty, alternative forms of assessment, and multimedia to cater to learners who respond more positively to visual or auditory stimulation. It can also include using role-play to motivate kinesthetic learners. These activities can motivate at-risk students to actively participate in EFL classes.

Technology

Emerging technologies offer a range of tools and resources that can be integrated into lessons to enhance student learning. Such integration creates opportunities for at-risk students to catch up with their peers (Magableh & Abdullah, 2020). Teachers can optimize individual learning experiences through language-learning applications and online games. Additionally, many teachers and students utilize social media to support the e-learning process (Haleem, Javaid, Qadri, & Suman, 2022).

Supportive Learning Environment

Students in Japan are often hesitant to discuss learning challenges openly because cultural norms emphasize modesty and conformity. Therefore, educators must establish a supportive learning environment where students feel comfortable sharing their difficulties. Fostering a sense of community, encouraging positive peer interactions, and providing constructive feedback are essential components of a supportive learning environment (Magableh & Abdullah, 2020).

Setting Goals and Personal Interests

Setting realistic and achievable goals provides students with direction, helps them recognize their progress, and fosters a motivating sense of accomplishment (Sapan & Mede, 2022). The goals should reflect each student's learning ability and be attainable.

Teachers should adapt the learning materials they use to connect with students' hobbies or career goals, thereby fostering motivation and engagement. For example, teachers might encourage discussion of global issues, initiate projects aligned with students' future career goals, or explore media aligned with students' age-group interests.

Educators should design interactive lessons incorporating group work, peer collaboration, real-world tasks, and clearly defined objectives. Timely feedback and a positive classroom environment further sustain attention and effort, thereby improving overall learning outcomes.

Limitations & Future Directions

The sample size (n=55) was limited. Although the research insights are valuable, a larger participant pool could enhance the study's generalizability. Additionally, a study with regular surveys may have produced more comprehensive results. All survey questions were written in English, requiring students to respond in the same language. Providing a bilingual questionnaire could have improved comprehension and yielded more detailed responses.

Recommendations for Future Studies

Future research should increase participant numbers and utilize bilingual survey instruments. Additionally, future studies could incorporate student performance data to examine how teachers' motivational techniques, classroom management strategies, feedback, and teacher-student interactions influence the motivation and engagement of at-risk EFL students.

Discussion

This research offers insights into motivating at-risk students in Japan, particularly those reluctant to share challenges due to cultural norms of modesty. Balancing academic responsibilities with extracurricular activities, especially for student-athletes, can result in significant stress and diminished motivation. The findings addressing RQ1 indicated that effective motivation for at-risk students requires instructional approaches that reduce anxiety, provide structure, and acknowledge the unique pressures present in Japanese classrooms.

Culturally responsive teaching, which integrates students' cultural backgrounds into language learning, can enhance engagement by reducing anxiety and fostering inclusivity. When combined with a supportive classroom environment where students feel comfortable expressing challenges, motivation, and participation can improve (Jackson-Barrett, 2021). In contexts where students are hesitant to seek help, establishing a safe environment is essential.

The study also underscores the importance of differentiated instruction and technology integration. Customizing lessons to accommodate individual learning preferences and leveraging technology can empower at-risk students to become more confident and engaged (Magableh & Abdullah, 2020; Haleem et al., 2022).

Goal-setting is identified as a significant motivator, particularly when objectives are connected to students' personal interests or career aspirations. Students who perceive English learning as relevant to their future are more motivated. Humor in the classroom proved to be a powerful engagement tool, students reported that light- hearted interactions and humorous examples increased enjoyment and willingness to participate, even among the students who previously were reluctant to engage. As Yuto said: "I love to laugh with my teacher." These findings related to RQ2 suggest that aligning academic objectives with personal interests enhances the perceived value of language acquisition and fosters intrinsic motivation.

These findings suggest that combining learner-centered activities, technology integration, goal-setting, and humor can significantly boost motivation and participation. Together, they provide new insights into effective strategies for supporting at-risk EFL learners in Japanese university contexts, emphasizing the value of personalized, engaging, and culturally sensitive instruction.

Conclusion

The findings of this study underscore the important role of motivation in academic performance. Supporting at-risk EFL university students necessitates approaches that address individual needs, cultural backgrounds, and specific challenges. Effective strategies include culturally responsive teaching, differentiated instruction, technology integration, creating a supportive learning environment, setting attainable academic goals, and aligning learning tasks with students' interests. Teachers and educational institutions should ensure that all students have opportunities to succeed.

Appendix-A

Questionnaire

Part A: Background Information

1. Sex

a. Female

b. Male

c. Other

2. School Year

a. First-Year

b. Second-Year

3. At what age did you start learning English?

6-10

11-12

13-15

16+

4. What is the second foreign language you are learning?

a. Chinese

c. French

d. German

e. Italian

f. Korean

g. Russian

h. Spanish

i.Other

5. How confident do you feel expressing yourself verbally in English?

a) extremely confident

b) confident

c) a little confident

d) Not at all

6. How confident do you feel expressing yourself in Japanese?

a) extremely confident

b) confident

c) a little confident

d) Not at all

7. How motivated are you to learn English?

a) Extremely motivated

b) Somewhat motivated

c) Neutral

d) Not very motivated

e) Not motivated at all

8. Is English important for your future job/career?

a) Yes

b) No

c) Other

9. Do you like when teachers use Japanese examples/culture in lessons?

a) Disagree

b) Agree

c) Not sure

10. Does studying English feel more interesting when it connects to your hobbies (anime, J-pop, etc.)?

a) Disagree

b) Agree

c) Not sure

11. Do you think you learn better when you can choose your activities (games vs. reading)?

a) Yes

b) No

c) Not sure

12. Group work with friends helps me practice English.

a) Yes

b) No

c) Not sure

13. Does positive feedback from the teacher increase your motivation to study English?

a) Yes

b) No

c) Not sure

14. What is the BIGGEST CHALLENGE in learning English?

_____
_____
_____

15. What is one thing teachers could do to help you feel more motivated to study?

_____
_____
_____

16. What topics in your classes or assignments did you find particularly interesting?

_____
_____
_____

References

Chen, J. F., Warden, C. A., & Chang, H. (2005). Motivators that do not Motivate: The Case of Chinese EFL Learners and the Influence of Culture on Motivation. *TESOL Quarterly*, *39*(4), 609–633.

Dörnyei, Z., & Csizér, K. (1998). Ten Commandments for Motivating Language Learners: Results of an empirical study. *Language Teaching Research*, *2*(3), 203–229. https://doi.org/10.1191/136216898668159830

Dörnyei, Z., & Ottó, I. (1998). Motivation in action: A process Model of L2 Motivation. *Working Papers in Applied Linguistics,* Thames Valley University, London, Vol. 4, pp. 43-69.

Dörnyei, Z. (2001a). *Motivational Strategies in the Language Classroom*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Dörnyei, Z. (2001b). *Teaching and Researching Motivation*. Essex, England: Pearson Education Limited.

Dörnyei, Z. (2005). *The Psychology of the Language Learner: Individual Differences in Second Language Acquisition*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Dörnyei, Z. (2010a). The Relationship between Language Aptitude and Language Learning Motivation: Individual Differences from a Dynamic Systems Perspective. In E. Macaro (Ed.), *Continuum companion to second language acquisition* (pp. 247–267). London: Continuum.

Gardner, R. C. (1985). *Social psychology and second language learning: The role of attitudes and motivation*. London: Edward Arnold.

Grimaldi, M. (2024). Students reach breaking point in Japan. *UCA News*. https://www.ucanews.com/news/students-reach-breaking-point-in-japan/106911.

Haleem, A., Javaid, M., Qadri, M. A., & Suman, R. (2022). Understanding the role of digital technologies in education: A review. *Sustainable Operations and Computers*, *3*, 275–285. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.susoc.2022.05.004

Hammond, C. (2017). Culturally Responsive Teaching in the Japanese Classroom: A Comparative Analysis of Cultural Teaching and Learning Styles in Japan and the United States. Journal of the Faculty of Economics, KGU, 17(1), 41-50.

Huang, X., & Chalmers, H. (2023). Implementation and effects of pedagogical translanguaging in EFL classrooms: A systematic review. *Languages, 8*(3), 194. https://doi.org/10.3390/languages8030194

Ikoma, K. (2025). *English learning motivation in Japan*. グローバル人材育成研究センター. http://hdl.handle.net/10098/000200054.

Jackson-Barrett, E. M. (2021). *On country learning: Towards a culturally responsive pedagogy for Aboriginal education* (Doctoral dissertation, Murdoch University). Murdoch University Research Repository. https://ro.ecu.edu.au/ajte/vol43/iss6/6/.

Jolly, J. C. (2008). Raising the question #9: Is the student-athlete population unique? And why should we care? *Communication Education, 57*(1), 145–151. https://doi.org/10.1080/03634520701613676.

Kikuchi, K. & Hamada, Y. (2023). Revising L2 Motivational Self System Questionnaire for Japanese learners of English. KANAGAWA UNIVERSITY Center for Language Studies, 45(1), 67–86.

Magableh, I., & Abdullah, A. (2020). The effect of differentiated instruction on EFL learners: Teachers' perspective. *International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences*, *10*(5).

Melendez, M. C. (2007). The influence of athletic participation on the college adjustment of freshman and sophomore student-athletes. *College Student Retention, 8*(1), 39–55.

Nishida, R. (2012c). Motivating Japanese University EFL Learners in the Language Classroom Using a Task-based Approach. Shoin ELTC Forum 1, 21-30.

Omar-Fauzee, M. S., & Don, Y., Yaakob, D., Sutresna, N., Bin Abdullah, N., Bakir, M. (2014). The Coping Strategies among Student-Athletes who have to Let Go of their Academic Goal. International Journal of Academic Research in Psychology 1 (1). https://doi.org/10.6007/IJARP/v1-i1/914.

Sapan, M., & Mede, E. (2022). The effects of differentiated instruction (DI) on achievement, motivation, and autonomy among English learners. *Iranian Journal of Language Teaching Research*, *10*(1), 127–144. https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1330093.pdf.

Slavin, R. E., & Madden, N. A. (1989). *What works for students at risk: A research synthesis*. Johns Hopkins University.

Suenaga, C. V. (2025). Factors Affecting the Motivation of EFL University Students in Japan. The Centre for the Study of English Language Teaching Journal Fukuoka Jo Gakuin University 2025, 13, 25-42.

Sugita McEown, M., & Takeuchi, O. (2014). Motivational strategies in EFL classrooms: How do teachers impact students' motivation? *Innovation in Language Learning and Teaching*, *8*(1), 20–38.

Takase, A. (2012). *The impact of extensive reading on reluctant Japanese EFL learners*. **The European Journal of Applied Linguistics and TEFL, 1**(1), 97–114.

Tang, S.Y.F., Wong, A.K.Y., & Cheng, M.M.H. (2014, November). The preparation of highly motivated and professionally competent teachers in initial teacher education. Asia Pacific Educational Research Association (APERA) 2014 Conference, Hong Kong, Hong Kong.

Thompson, B. R., & Geren, P. R. (2002). Classroom strategies for identifying and helping college students at risk for academic failure. *College Student Journal, 36*(3), 398–402.

Yamashita, N., Takemoto, T., Murakawa, H., Sasagawa, O., Maruyabashi, S., Sato, S., & Nakamura, S. (2021). Risk factors for dropouts of university students assessed by statistical modeling. *International Journal of Educational Media and Technology*, *15*(2), 32–42.