



## Encouraging children's motivation for foreign language learning in an inclusive educational context

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*Introduction.* Developmentally sensitive approaches underscore that motivation cannot be examined in isolation from the educational environment, but should instead be understood as emerging from the interaction among learners, teachers, and the broader social context in which learning occurs. *Aim.* This review aims to examine, through qualitative analysis of relevant empirical and theoretical review studies, the strategies, practices, and contextual conditions that foster motivation for foreign language learning among preschool and early elementary school children, with a particular emphasis on inclusive educational environments. *Method.* A systematic content analysis was conducted of eleven studies published between 2012 and 2025, representing diverse methodological approaches, including qualitative, quantitative, mixed-methods, experimental, and longitudinal designs, across preschool, primary, and inclusive educational contexts. *Results.* The results indicate that, in early childhood, motivation is predominantly intrinsic and affectively grounded, and is most strongly expressed when instruction is organized through interactive, play-based, and experiential activities that foster active participation, social interaction, and a positive emotional learning experience. The findings further demonstrate that motivation is dynamic in nature and is significantly influenced by the level of teacher support, the presence of an emotionally safe classroom climate, and the quality of feedback, as well as by the development of learners' self-concept. *Conclusion.* Digitally supported and multisensory approaches may enhance curiosity and sustained engagement when they are meaningfully integrated into instructional practice. In inclusive educational contexts, accessibility, clear instructional structure, visual support, and differentiated modes of participation emerge as key conditions for sustaining children's motivation over time.

*Keywords:* motivation, early foreign language learning, inclusive education, teacher support, play-based learning

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## Introduction

Contemporary research on motivation for foreign language learning increasingly emphasizes its dynamic and developmentally contingent nature, particularly in early childhood, when motivation is primarily shaped by affective experiences, the quality of interaction, and learners' perceptions of active participation in the educational process. At this stage, intrinsic motivation is closely associated with a sense of competence, the perceived meaningfulness of instructional activities, and children's opportunities for active engagement in learning, whereas external incentives tend to have limited and often short-term effects (Papi & Khajavy, 2023; Teimouri et al., 2022).

Developmentally sensitive approaches underscore that motivation cannot be examined in isolation from the educational environment, but should instead be understood as emerging from the interaction among learners, teachers, and the broader social context in which learning occurs (Mercer, 2023). In this regard, contemporary pedagogical discourse highlights the significance of a supportive and inclusive classroom climate, differentiated instructional practices, and multiple modes of participation, which collectively facilitate engagement and the sustained motivation of children within heterogeneous learning groups (Oga-Baldwin & Nakata, 2017; Papi & Hiver, 2020; Vuković et al., 2024). Research further suggests that multisensory and digitally supported approaches can foster curiosity and intrinsic motivation only when they are pedagogically grounded and integrated into meaningful instructional practices, rather than implemented as isolated technological add-ons (Khajavy et al., 2018). Accordingly, this study calls for a systematic examination of how diverse pedagogical approaches and instructional conditions contribute to the development and sustainability of children's motivation to learn a foreign language within inclusive educational environments, which constitutes the focus of the present analysis.

Therefore, this study seeks to synthesize existing research in order to identify pedagogical conditions that support the development and sustainability of motivation for foreign language learning in inclusive educational settings.

## Objective

The purpose of this study is to examine, through qualitative analysis of existing empirical and theoretical review studies, the strategies and conditions that foster motivation for foreign language learning among preschool and early elementary school children, as well as the effectiveness of different pedagogical approaches in instructional practice. Particular emphasis is placed on the extent to which the analyzed approaches create conditions for the inclusive participation of all children in learning activities, including an emotionally safe classroom climate, the accessibility of materials and tasks, differentiated instruction, and support for multiple modes of engagement.

The objectives of this study are to systematize relevant national and international research on children's motivation for foreign language learning in preschool and early elementary education, and to analyze the pedagogical approaches employed across diverse research contexts. The study further includes a comparative examination of factors influencing the development and sustainability of motivation, with particular attention to features of the educational environment that support inclusive participation. On the basis of the synthesized findings, recommendations for inclusive instructional practice are formulated.

The study is guided by the following assumptions:

- Children's motivation for foreign language learning is stronger when instruction is structured around interactive and play-based activities that enable active participation and meaningful social interaction.
- In early childhood, intrinsic motivation tends to predominate and is more stable within a supportive and emotionally safe classroom climate characterized by visible teacher support and constructive feedback.
- Multisensory and technology-supported approaches can support motivation when they are pedagogically designed to enable diverse forms of participation.

## Method

This study adopts a qualitative approach grounded in the review and synthesis of relevant scholarly literature, with the aim of comparing findings from empirical and theoretical review studies on children's motivation in early foreign language learning. The primary research method is a content analysis of peer-reviewed articles, focusing on motivational factors, instructional approaches, and features of the learning environment that influence the effectiveness and sustainability of motivation. A literature search was conducted across the Scopus, Web of Science, and ERIC databases, as well as the Google Scholar search engine, covering articles published between 2012 and 2025. Keyword combinations in English were used to capture studies related to early foreign language learning and motivation (e.g., *early/young language learners, foreign language learning, motivation, engagement*), as well as to inclusive educational contexts (e.g., *inclusive education, special educational needs, disability, multisensory, digital support*). The inclusion criteria comprised studies focusing on motivation for foreign language learning among preschool and early elementary school children, published in peer-reviewed journals, and addressing instructional or inclusive educational contexts. Studies focusing exclusively on adult learners or unrelated educational domains were excluded. The analysis followed a thematic content analysis approach, in which key concepts related to motivation, instructional strategies, and features of the learning environment were identified, compared, and synthesized across studies.

In addition to the database search, a reference-checking procedure was applied to selected studies to identify additional relevant publications. The initial search yielded 87 studies aligned with the domain of motivation in early foreign language learning. After removing duplicates and applying basic inclusion criteria related to the publication period, participants' age, and relevance to instructional and inclusive contexts, 26 studies were retained for further screening. Following a detailed full-text analysis and an assessment of methodological and thematic relevance, 11 studies were included in the final qualitative synthesis, which constituted the analytical corpus of this paper. Although the analyzed studies encompass diverse age groups, educational contexts, and methodological approaches ranging from qualitative research in preschool settings to longitudinal and quantitative investigations in school and inclusive contexts, this heterogeneity represents both a limitation and a strength of the review, as it allows motivation for foreign language learning to be examined as a process shaped by developmental and pedagogical factors.

## Results

This section presents the results of a qualitative analysis of selected empirical and review studies addressing children's motivation in early foreign language learning across diverse educational contexts. Taken together, the reviewed studies provide a basis for examining how children's motivation develops in relation to interactive learning experiences, supportive classroom relationships, and the design of learning environments that enable active participation.

Mihaljević Djigunović (2012) provides an analytical overview of European research on children's motivation and attitudes toward early foreign language learning, with particular attention to the development of motivation across different educational settings and over extended periods. The author synthesizes findings from a range of cross-sectional and longitudinal studies conducted in several European countries (e.g., Croatian, Hungarian, English, Spanish, and Swedish contexts), involving participants from preschool age through the final years of primary education and encompassing variable sample sizes. The review places particular emphasis on the operationalization and measurement of children's motivation, the instruments employed, and the methodological limitations identified across studies. The findings indicate that, during the initial stages of foreign language learning, children are predominantly driven by intrinsic motivation and tend to perceive language learning as an activity associated with play, curiosity, and enjoyment of communication. Furthermore, early experiences of success, teacher praise, and opportunities for active participation are consistently associated with the sustained maintenance of motivation.

In the longitudinal studies referenced in the review, such as the Pécs project and ELLiE, a gradual shift in motivation over time is documented,

moving from initial enthusiasm toward more differentiated motives, including an increased awareness of the perceived usefulness of the foreign language. Motivation appears to be dynamic and may fluctuate over short time spans, depending on classroom climate, task structure and cognitive demands, the inclusion of play-based elements, and the teacher's communication style. Interactive and play-based approaches are associated with higher levels of engagement. The reported findings further indicate that activities incorporating sensory support, together with the use of contemporary instructional and digital materials, contribute to a stronger sense of achievement.

Beyond large-scale review findings, several empirical studies offer a more detailed perspective on how classroom interaction, teacher support, and the emotional climate of the learning environment shape children's engagement in early foreign language learning. Brumen (2011) presents an empirical examination of preschool children aged four to six and their perceptions of foreign language learning, as well as the factors shaping motivation at this developmental stage. The research was conducted in Slovenian preschools using developmentally appropriate methods, including visual techniques, symbolic scales, short interviews, and systematic observation, which enabled careful documentation of children's experiences and responses throughout the learning process. The results indicate that children most often experience foreign language learning as an enjoyable activity associated with play, music, movement, visual materials, and creative tasks. Higher levels of interest and engagement are observed when activities involve active participation and provide opportunities to experience success. The findings further highlight the role of group dynamics, as a supportive and emotionally safe environment is consistently associated with a greater willingness among children to participate. The teacher-child relationship emerges as a salient factor, with teachers' patience, enthusiasm, and emotional availability associated with higher levels of motivation. The study further indicates that, at this age, children generally do not associate language learning with future benefits; rather, their motivation is shaped by the immediacy of the learning experience, a sense of acceptance, and satisfaction with the learning process. The findings also suggest that when activities are overly demanding, insufficiently clear, or lack playful elements, motivation tends to decline rapidly.

Nikolov and Mihaljević Djigunović (2023) provide a critical review of research on early foreign language learning, focusing on preschool children as well as the roles of teachers/educators and parents. The analysis covers studies published between 2012 and 2025 and includes a range of methodological approaches, including observational, interview-based, experimental, longitudinal, and case study designs. The authors emphasize that assessing motivation in preschool-aged children presents substantial methodological challenges and that developmentally appropriate methods, such as games, visual

supports, symbolic scales, and naturalistic observation, tend to yield more reliable insights than traditional measurement instruments. The synthesized findings indicate that children most often display a positive attitude toward foreign language learning, with motivation at this stage primarily grounded in curiosity, social interaction, and enjoyment of activities, while instrumental motives remain relatively rare. The reviewed studies further suggest that motivation tends to decline in contexts characterized by an unfavorable classroom climate, unclear expectations, and developmentally inappropriate tasks. By comparison, teacher enthusiasm and pedagogical preparedness, along with the adaptation of activities to children's developmental levels and individual needs, are consistently associated with higher levels of motivation.

The review further highlights the variability of parental attitudes, ranging from supportive engagement to unrealistic expectations, and emphasizes that the preschool period primarily represents a phase of fostering a positive orientation toward language learning, while measurable language outcomes tend to emerge more gradually. Hu and McGeown (2020) examine the relationship between motivation for foreign language learning and academic achievement among elementary school students in a Chinese educational context. The study is based on a sample of 351 students aged nine to twelve and combines self-report questionnaire data with objective indicators of achievement, including school grades and standardized test scores. Multiple dimensions of motivation are analyzed, including intrinsic motivation, enjoyment of learning, learners' self-perceptions, the perceived value of the subject, and forms of extrinsic motivation. The findings indicate that affective and intrinsic components of motivation are most strongly associated with higher levels of achievement, whereas external factors such as pressure, fear of failure, and reward orientation show markedly weaker associations with academic success. The study further suggests that perceiving learning as a pleasant and meaningful process is linked to greater persistence and more consistent engagement, and that features of the instructional environment and the organization of activities play a significant role in shaping students' motivational responses.

Graham (2016) examines changes in student motivation in early foreign language learning across multiple time points and explores the relationship between motivational trajectories, perceived teacher support, and classroom climate. The study integrates quantitative measures, including motivation scales and questionnaires assessing teacher support and classroom climate, with qualitative data drawn from students' open-ended responses. The results indicate that motivation is strongest at the initial stages of learning, while, over time, a sense of competence, confidence in language use, and the quality of feedback play a more prominent role. Individual differences in motivational trajectories are evident, with students who perceive teacher support as consistent and who learn within a more positive social climate demonstrating more stable

patterns of motivation. In comparison, learning environments characterized by heightened pressure and a strong emphasis on error correction are associated with a more rapid decline in interest and a reduced willingness to participate, particularly in speaking activities.

In addition to interpersonal and classroom-related factors, recent research has increasingly explored how developmental characteristics and the integration of multisensory and technology-supported approaches contribute to sustaining children's motivation over time. Hennebry-Leung and Lamb (2024) examine motivation for foreign language learning across diverse educational stages and age groups, highlighting developmental differences in the sources of motivation. The study is grounded in the L2 Motivational Self System framework, with particular emphasis on the roles of self-perception and the learning experience. The findings indicate that in younger children, motivation is predominantly affective and context-dependent, closely linked to the enjoyment of activities such as play, music, and classroom interaction, with a central role attributed to the teacher-child relationship and a sense of security within the learning environment. At this stage, instrumental motives are reported to be weak. In older students, the study suggests that self-perception, personal goals, and self-regulatory processes become increasingly salient, while the influence of purely play-based factors gradually diminishes. Family support appears to be more salient at younger ages, while, over time, its influence gradually gives way to individual regulatory mechanisms and the broader school context. Jaekel et al. (2022) report a longitudinal study examining the effects of an early start in English language learning on the development of receptive skills across schooling in Germany. More than 2,800 students participated in the study, who began learning English in Grade 1 (ages six to seven) or Grade 3 (ages eight to nine), with standardized listening and reading assessments administered in Grades 5, 7, and 9. In Grade 5, early starters demonstrate an advantage in both receptive domains, whereas by Grade 7, later starters tend to catch up and, in some respects, particularly in reading, surpass their peers. By Grade 9, the advantage of early starters becomes pronounced again across both domains. The authors argue that developmental outcomes vary over time and are shaped by the school context, instructional quality, and program continuity, which together provide the interpretive framework for the observed achievement trajectories. Marszałek (2022) examines the relationship between self-concept and intrinsic motivation in foreign language learning, with particular attention to the role of perceived competence in the motivational process. A quantitative design was employed, using questionnaire-based measures of students' self-concept and motivational orientations. Results show a positive association between a more developed self-concept and higher levels of intrinsic motivation. Students who perceive themselves as capable demonstrate greater willingness to engage, higher levels of persistence, and a stronger enjoyment of the learning process.

Greater learner autonomy is associated with a stronger self-concept and a readiness to engage with challenges, whereas a more negative self-perception is linked to the avoidance of language-related situations and lower persistence.

Abdelghani et al. (2022) examine the potential of digital conversational agents to foster curiosity and inquiry-based learning in children. An experimental design was employed, involving a sample of 51 participants aged nine to ten years. Participants were exposed to both a neutral-agent condition and a condition in which the agent prompted question formulation through semantic and linguistic cues. Children exposed to the incentive-agent condition asked a greater number of questions, which were more complex and inquiry-oriented, including a higher proportion of divergent questions. Sustained research activities were observed for longer periods, and children demonstrated greater independence in seeking information. Although this research does not focus exclusively on foreign language instruction, the findings suggest that digital interaction is associated with increased curiosity and more active task engagement. These considerations extend further when learning environments are designed to respond to diverse developmental and sensory needs, highlighting the importance of inclusive instructional practices that enable participation for all learners. Domagała-Zyśk et al. (2025) offer a thematic overview and conceptual framework addressing foreign language learning among learners with developmental disabilities and special educational needs, as well as the experiences of teachers across mainstream, inclusive, and specialized educational settings. Rather than reporting a single empirical study, the authors synthesize and critically examine findings from a range of contemporary publications, highlighting shared themes and pedagogical implications. Motivation tends to decline in contexts characterized by rigid instructional demands, insufficiently adapted activities, and limited forms of learner support. At the same time, the findings underscore the importance of accessibility, clear instructional structure, and differentiated modes of participation for sustaining learner motivation and engagement. A separate section addresses teachers' experiences, highlighting the significance of professional competencies related to individualization, differentiation, and the adaptation of instructional materials, as well as the role of systemic support in effective teaching practice.

Olszak and Borowicz (2025) examine the learning styles and strategies of students with hearing impairments in foreign language acquisition, aiming to identify factors associated with learner engagement and academic success. Students predominantly employ visually oriented strategies, including working with written texts, graphic representations, illustrations, and visually structured materials, while auditory-based activities are less accessible. Learners who use a combination of strategies, such as visual and cognitive approaches, including predicting meaning and linking new vocabulary to familiar concepts, demonstrate higher levels of engagement, a better understanding of the language

material, and a stronger sense of control over their learning. Task structure emerges as a significant factor. Clear procedural steps, visual support, and a predictable sequence of activities are associated with greater task confidence, whereas less structured tasks and rapid verbal interaction are associated with reduced participation among some students.

### **Discussion**

Taken together, the findings presented in the Results section indicate that motivation for foreign language learning among preschool and early elementary school children is a complex, dynamic, and developmentally conditioned process shaped by the interaction of pedagogical approaches, the instructional environment, and learners' experiences of classroom participation. The synthesis of findings identifies several interconnected factors that collectively shape the quality and sustainability of motivation during this period. First, interactive, play-based, and experiential activities consistently emerge as central drivers of motivation in early foreign language learning.

The findings reported by Mihaljević Djigunović (2012), Brumen (2011), and the review by Nikolov and Mihaljević Djigunović (2023) indicate that, during this developmental period, children tend to experience language primarily as a means of participating in activities rather than as a formal school subject. Activities grounded in play, movement, music, and visual and sensory input are associated with higher levels of interest, engagement, and positive emotional experiences of learning. Motivation, by contrast, tends to decline when activities become rigid, overly reproductive, or developmentally inappropriate, indicating a strong sensitivity at this age to the quality of instructional organization. These findings indicate that, in early foreign language learning, motivation is strongest when instruction is structured as a meaningful, active, and emotionally supportive experience.

A second major line of findings concerns the teacher's role and the predominance of intrinsic motivation at younger ages. Across multiple studies, motivation in early foreign language learning is described not as a stable trait but as a process shaped by everyday classroom experiences. Graham (2016) reports that students' motivational trajectories vary over time depending on whether teacher support is perceived as consistent, encouraging, and emotionally supportive. Students who learn in environments where errors are treated as a natural part of the learning process and where clear, constructive feedback is provided demonstrate greater persistence and a stronger willingness to participate actively. These findings align with the results of Hu and McGeown (2020), which indicate that affective and intrinsic components of motivation are most closely associated with achievement, whereas external pressures and outcome-oriented approaches tend to have limited, and at times negative, effects.

Building on the longitudinal findings reported in the Results section, a developmental perspective indicates that sources of motivation change over time. Hennebry-Leung and Lamb (2024) report that, in younger children, motivation is primarily affective and context-dependent, whereas with increasing age, self-perception, more explicit personal goals, and self-regulatory processes gradually become more salient. The longitudinal study by Jaekel et al. (2022) complements these findings by indicating that the benefits of an early start in foreign language learning are neither linear nor automatic, but depend largely on instructional quality, program continuity, and a supportive educational context. These results suggest that motivation and achievement emerge through sustained pedagogical processes rather than as a direct function of the age at which learning begins. Findings related to self-concept make a distinct contribution to understanding the motivational process in early foreign language learning. Marszałek (2022) reports that students who develop a positive perception of their own language abilities demonstrate higher levels of intrinsic motivation, persistence, and learner autonomy. Experiences that undermine a sense of competence are associated with the avoidance of learning activities and a gradual decline in motivation. Such findings underscore the importance of instructional practices that provide opportunities for success, support multiple modes of participation, and offer developmentally appropriate levels of challenge, particularly within heterogeneous groups of learners.

A third line of findings concerns the role of multisensory and digitally supported approaches. The results reported by Hu and McGeown (2020) and Abdelghani et al. (2022) indicate that visual, interactive, and technology-supported content can foster curiosity, exploratory behavior, and sustained engagement when it is pedagogically designed and integrated into meaningful instructional activities. The findings suggest that technology does not function as a motivational factor in itself, but rather as a means of strengthening intrinsic motivation when it supports dialogue, active engagement, and learner autonomy. Studies conducted in inclusive educational contexts further indicate that the motivation of children with developmental disabilities and special educational needs is shaped less by individual limitations than by the quality of the pedagogical environment. Domagała-Zyśk et al. (2025) and Olszak and Borowicz (2025) report that accessibility, clear task structure, visual support, and differentiated modes of participation are associated with higher levels of learner confidence and engagement, particularly among children with sensory impairments. These findings further indicate that motivationally effective strategies in early foreign language learning are both inclusive and sustainable.

Overall, the analyzed studies confirm the initial assumptions that motivation in early foreign language learning develops through the interaction of pedagogical approaches, classroom climate, and opportunities for active participation. When these elements are pedagogically aligned, children

demonstrate more stable intrinsic motivation, higher levels of engagement, and more favorable long-term outcomes, providing a foundation for the pedagogical recommendations presented in the following chapter.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, the analyzed studies confirm the initial assumptions that children's motivation for foreign language learning at an early age is most effectively fostered within an inclusive educational environment that offers a supportive classroom climate, a clear structure for instructional activities, opportunities for active and varied participation, and consistent teacher support. For teaching practice, these findings suggest the importance of designing interactive and play-based activities, differentiating tasks in accordance with children's developmental levels, and using multisensory and digital resources in a purposeful and developmentally appropriate manner to support curiosity and intrinsic motivation. At the same time, the findings point to the need for further research employing longitudinal and interdisciplinary approaches to examine more closely the dynamics of motivation across diverse inclusive contexts and the role of teacher competencies in sustaining motivation for foreign language learning.

It is also important to acknowledge certain limitations of this review arising from the heterogeneity of the analyzed corpus in terms of participants' ages, educational contexts, methodological approaches, and the ways in which motivation is operationalized and measured. At the same time, this heterogeneity constitutes a significant strength of the review, as it enables the examination of motivation for foreign language learning as a complex, dynamic, and context-dependent process that manifests differently across pedagogical conditions and learners' needs. Such a perspective supports a more nuanced understanding of inclusive teaching practices and provides a foundation for developing flexible, developmentally sensitive, and sustainable pedagogical approaches to early foreign language learning.

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## Podsticanje motivacije dece za učenje stranog jezika u inkluzivnom vaspitno-obrazovnom kontekstu

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*Uvod:* Razvojno osetljivi pristupi naglašavaju da se motivacija ne može ispitati izolovano od obrazovnog okruženja, već je treba shvatiti kao rezultat interakcije između učenika, nastavnika i šireg društvenog konteksta u kojem se učenje odvija. *Cilj:* Cilj ovog istraživanja je da se kroz kvalitativnu analizu relevantnih empirijskih i teorijsko-preglednih studija ispituju načini, strategije i uslovi koji podstiču motivaciju dece predškolskog i ranog školskog uzrasta za učenje stranog jezika, sa posebnim fokusom na inkluzivno obrazovno okruženje. *Metod:* Primenjena je sadržajna analiza jedanaest radova objavljenih u periodu 2012. do 2025. godine, koji obuhvataju različite metodološke pristupe, kvalitativne, kvantitativne, mešovite, eksperimentalne i longitudinalne dizajne, kao i više obrazovnih konteksta, uključujući predškolske, školske i inkluzivne uslove. *Rezultati:* Rezultati pokazuju da je u ranom uzrastu motivacija prevashodno unutrašnja i afektivno zasnovana, te da je najizraženija kada je nastava organizovana kroz interaktivne, igrovne i iskustveno zasnovane aktivnosti koje omogućavaju aktivno učešće, socijalnu interakciju i pozitivan emocionalni doživljaj učenja. Uočeno je da se motivacija dinamično menja i da značajno zavisi od nastavničke podrške, emocionalno bezbedne učioničke klime i kvaliteta povratne informacije, kao i od razvoja učeničkog samokoncepta. *Zaključak:* Digitalno podržani i multisenzorni pristupi mogu podstaći radoznalost i produženo angažovanje, ali samo kada su pedagoški promišljeno integrisani u smislene aktivnosti. U inkluzivnom kontekstu pristupačnost, jasna struktura, vizuelna podrška i diferencirani načini učešća izdvajaju se kao ključni uslovi održive motivacije.

*Ključne reči:* motivacija, rano učenje stranog jezika, inkluzivno obrazovanje, podrška nastavnika, učenje kroz igru

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