

# Beyond the Boundaries of the Self: Applying Relational Theory Towards an Understanding of the Teacher-Student Relationship as a Driver of Motivation in Foreign Language Learning

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## ABSTRACT

Previous research on the foreign language (FL) learner has yielded a rich body of knowledge on personality, individual differences, and conceptions of the self as a measure of motivation. While these contributions have greatly enriched our understanding of learner psychology, the current paper proposes an analytical framing of language learning based on relational theory, which positions human relationships with others as the main driver of the psyche and behavior. As human beings are relationally dependent from birth, according to this theory, the self can only be conceptualized in relation to others. Applied to language learning, this perspective shifts the focus from the attainment of knowledge as an individual, private endeavor, to a relational process in which students and teacher are interwoven perform. As part of a larger study on student perceptions of teacher emotion, qualitative data were collected as case studies from eight adult learners and analyzed using qualitative content analysis. Results support the power of the teacher-student relationship to influence and motivate students both positively and negatively, affirming the notion of FL learning as a relational process in accordance with Gergen's (2009) notion that relationships are not merely the self interacting with the other but a true confluence.

*Keywords:* FL motivation, learner psychology, L2 motivational self system, relational theory

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## INTRODUCTION

Social milieu has long been thought to be influential in foreign language (FL) learners' motivation (Gardner, 1985), with emphases on the importance of both the teacher (Guilloteaux & Dörnyei, 2008; Mercer & Kostoulas, 2018; Moskowitz & Dewaele, 2020, 2021) and the learner's social context at large, including significant others (Noels et al., 2019). In the current paper, we direct our focus towards the teacher-student relationship, approaching the topic through the lens of relational psychology whose core precept is that human beings are necessarily bound by relationships, which form the bedrock of the psyche and serve as the main driver of motivation (Greenberg & Mitchell, 1983).

According to relational theory, behavior, attitudes and self-identity can only be understood in the context of relatedness (Greenberg & Mitchell, 1983). In terms of education, Gill and Gergen (2020) believe that relational processes are fundamental, and Gergen (2020) proposes an understanding of the classroom as a place of relating where not only the subject matter is learned, but students will be "prepared for participation in the relational flows of the world while simultaneously placing a value on the process of relating itself" (Gergen, 2020, p. 26).

If the endeavor of FL learning can be viewed as a process embedded within a relational matrix (Mitchell, 1988), then the teacher-student relationship can be thought of as the fulcrum. The current study suggests shifting towards a more relationally-oriented understanding of FL learning motivation, in which learning takes place in a relational matrix with the teacher-student relationship featuring most centrally. While Gergen (2009) considered education to be the building material of relationships, in the current paper we adopt the opposite stance: relationships, namely that of the teacher and student, are the building blocks of FL learning motivation.

Guided by the tenets of relational psychology, this paper adopts a multiple case study approach, analyzing the testimonies of eight adult English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students' accounts of their emotional perceptions and relationships with their teachers to argue for an increased understanding of the importance of the teacher-student relationship as a driver of motivation. First, we review pertinent literature about the FL motivational self, the teacher-student relationship, and relational psychology.

Then we examine qualitative data that were collected as a supplement to a larger quantitative study dealing with how student perception of teacher emotion affected students' own attitudes and motivation (Moskowitz, 2021). The open-ended questions used in the qualitative data revolve around two main themes that were distilled from the results of the larger quantitative study: namely how teacher behavior influences students, and what the motivational role is of the interpersonal relationship between students and teachers. In the current study, we argue that the teacher-student relationship is elemental to FL learning motivation, and that perhaps an overemphasis on the self as the main theoretical model of motivation has effectively rendered relational aspects of FL learning overlooked and underleveraged.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### The Motivational Self in FL Learning

From the time of its inception in 2005, Dörnyei's second language (L2) motivational self system (L2MSS) quickly became the most widespread theoretical framework for exploring individual differences in L2 learning motivation. Composed of three distinct L2 selves, the ought-to self, the ideal self, and the learning experience, a key concept of the model is the idea that motivation is derived from the tension between how learners envisage themselves in ideal terms versus how they actually see themselves realistically in the present, and how learners' awareness of this gap might spur their motivation (Dörnyei, 2005, 2009).

Generally, the L2MSS has been shown consistently to be reliable and broadly applicable across varied contexts (Dörnyei, 2020) though research on the predictive nature of each component has been mixed. While Dörnyei and Ushioda (2011) vouch for the predictive validity of the ideal L2 self, other researchers are quick to differentiate that while the ideal L2 self might be a predictor of motivation in some situations, it is not a reliable predictor of achievement (Kim & Kim, 2011; Lamb, 2012). Indeed, Moskovsky et al. (2016) found that in the context of Saudi learners, the ideal L2 self was actually a negative predictor of achievement. In a meta-analysis of 32 research reports, Al-Hoorie (2018) came to the conclusion that all three components of the L2MSS were strong predictors of motivational effort, but weak predictors of actual achievement.

Aside from the question of motivation versus achievement, one issue that has emerged with the ideal L2 self and the ought-to L2 self is the blurry delineation between own and other; own referring to the learner's own expectations, and other referring to what others expect from the learner. Teimouri (2017) argued for a theoretical revision, taking into account the bifurcation of learners' ought-to L2 self/own and ought-to L2 self/other. In a study of 524 Iranian learners of English, Teimouri sought to explore potential differences between own and other in learners' ought-to L2 self and ideal L2 self. He found a significant difference in the own and other ought-to L2 self, though not in the own and other ideal L2 self. In other words, "[o]ught-to L2 self/own represents externally imposed obligations and duties by significant others for learning an L2 that are ultimately internalized or shared by the learners for their personal meaning and value" (Teimouri, 2017, p. 700).

Despite the emphasis on the self and the ubiquity of the L2MSS, the teacher's role in FL learning motivation has been recognized throughout, to varying degrees. In an early empirical study predating the L2MSS, Dörnyei and Csizer (1998) outlined the "ten commandments" of FL learning motivation, with a biblical-style injunction to recognize the teacher's influence as a model of behavior and shaper of student attitudes. In later years, Lamb (2017) affirmed that language teachers have not only the power, but the burden to motivate students, which they can use for better or for worse.

In plain terms then, the main question of the current paper is: what if, rather than a component, the teacher-student relationship itself is a main driver of FL learning motivation? This is not an attempt to counterpose the importance of the self in motivation, but rather to try and adjust the lens in order to zoom out and see the self as integrated in a wider relational web. "In this vision, the basic unit of study is not the individual as a separate entity whose desires clash with an external reality, but an interactional field within which the individual arises and struggles to make contact and to articulate [themselves]" (Mitchell, 1988, p. 3).

## Relational Theory

In classic psychoanalysis, the individual can be understood as being motivated by instinctive drives ("drive theory") (Breuer & Freud, 1956), which often clash with social realities. In this line of reasoning, the mind is in a constant state of compromise between physical and primordial urges and the individual's own defenses against them, and psychological mechanisms for channeling and managing them. Whereas drive theory views the mind as essentially monadic, focusing on the self and the conflict within the self, relational theory considers conflict within a relational context, both arising within the self and from the other, but still relationally bound.

In seeking to explore the concept of the self and the relational, Sullivan (1972) theorized that individuals can only be understood in relation to others. While people tend to think of themselves in terms of personality, a roster of defining characteristics, and a rich catalog of life experiences, Sullivan emphasized the primacy of human relationships in determining those characteristics, molding behaviors and shaping those experiences. In other words, the self is always enmeshed in a relational framework from which it cannot be teased out. This is to say that whereas people tend to think of themselves in concrete terms, Sullivan might not consider personality to be a set of reified characteristics, but a performance and set of behavioral patterns which are highly influenced by relationships with others.

In 1973, Gergen proposed a relational approach to psychotherapy in which relationships rather than individuals are considered the main analytical component in exploring human behavior. In the intervening years, a shift towards relational thinking gained traction in the field of psychoanalysis, and in 1983, Greenberg and Mitchell published their watershed work *Object Relations in Psychoanalytic Theory*. The authors proposed an alternative to the classic Freudian drive model, with what they termed a "relational model," asserting that rather than drives, it is indeed relationships which are the basic material of the mind and the catalysts of human behavior. In their model, it is not that drives and instincts are supplanted by relationships, rather an individual experiences those drives within the framework of relationships, and not merely as a private experience within an isolated self.

As Mitchell (1988) explained, even desire will be experienced in a context of relatedness, and from that context, its meaning will be derived. Mitchell coined the term “relational matrix” to describe both the intrapsychic and interpersonal relationships which constitute the human experience (Mitchell, 1988, p. 9). In his conception, human beings are “shaped by and inevitably embedded within a matrix of relationships with other people, struggling both to maintain our ties to others and to differentiate ourselves from them” (Mitchell, 1988, p. 3).

Following along the lines of Greenberg and Mitchell’s (1983) early work and with intimations of Sullivan’s (1972) earlier work, Gergen (2009) posited that the individual always exists within a relational framework which is fundamental and the individual and relational could not be neatly disentangled. While he acknowledged the uniqueness of the individual, Gergen argued that even the characteristics and emotions that appear to be most unique and internal are shaped by relational processes. Furthermore, he argued against the decontextualization of knowledge, instead positing that knowledge is not only created through relationships between people, but that knowledge itself serves to create relationships (Gergen, 2009).

Despite its origins as a theoretical framework for psychoanalytic theory, Mitchell asserts that:

as a social theory of mind, the relational model is by no means the exclusive province of psychoanalytic theorizing. Interpersonal theory and object-relations theory are part of a larger movement in the direction of social theories of mind in several closely related disciplines. (Mitchell, 1988, p. 17).

Indeed, relational theory is highly relevant to learning and teaching, and researchers have emphasized that education should focus less on the isolated learner self, and more on the relational (Gergen, 2009; Gergen & Wortham, 2001; Wortham & Jackson, 2012). Street (1984) studied the relational processes involved in literacy, and Barton and Hamilton (1998) built on this research to look at how adult literacy in particular is contextualized and embedded within relational frameworks. In higher education, Ramsden (2008) emphasized the importance of improving the teacher-student relationship to improve teacher performance and subsequently, student outcome. The effects of relational

approaches to teaching and learning have also been studied in the sciences in higher education (Trigwell et al., 1999).

### Teacher-Student Relationship

When considering why to study the teacher-student relationship, the question seems to turn on itself reflexively: why not study it? Within the rich panoply of human relationships throughout the lifespan, that of teacher and student is consistently one of the most memorable and influential, occupying much time and psychic energy in both parties. Aside from being one of the strongest predictors of academic outcome for students (Hattie, 2009; Hughes et al., 2008; Klem & Connell, 2004; Wu et al., 2010), the relationship also affects teachers, with positive relationships promoting professional satisfaction and longevity (Day & Gu, 2010; O’Connor, 2008; Veldman, 2013). Much of the research on the interpersonal relationship between teachers and students has been in the context of K-12 education, and while these relationships are undoubtedly crucial in the formative years, we argue in the current paper that although perhaps colored by different characteristics, they remain influential in the adult years as well.

The teacher-student relationship is emotional by nature (Van Manen, 2017), but because of the prescribed social parameters, students usually have limited personal knowledge of their teachers, and vice versa. Teachers often craft a classroom persona, carefully deciding which personal details and emotions to reveal, play up or down, or keep cordoned off from student view entirely (King, 2016). Consequently, teachers often report feeling more like performers than educators (Beadle, 2009; Lamb, 2017). Despite the inherent limitations of the teacher-student relationship, many assumptions are at play; students construct an idea of who they think their teacher is and tend to behave accordingly. Due to the process of emotional contagion in the classroom, FL students and teachers are often emotionally in lockstep, particularly with positive emotion (Dewaele, 2017; Dewaele & Li, 2021; Dewaele & Mercer, 2018; Moskowitz & Dewaele, 2021).

The relationship is reciprocal by nature and student behavior has been shown to have a predictive effect on teacher happiness and wellbeing (Klassen et al., 2012; Split et al., 2011). In fact, in a study by Hagenauer et al., (2015),

the authors analyzed student behavior and its effect on teacher emotion in secondary school teachers, finding that student behavior and engagement could predict both positive and negative emotions in teachers, such as joy and anxiety.

In the context of adult FL learning, research on the teacher-student relationship is rather slim, though a broad body of research exists on children and adolescents across various subject matters. A common theme that can be gleaned from this research is the influence of the teacher-student relationship on predicting academic success and the interpersonal quality of the relationship as often being more important to students than the teacher's approach to the subject matter (Garner, 1995; Hattie, 2009; Wallace, 1996). In Hattie's (2009) milestone meta-analytical work "Visible Learning," he looked at the factors which most strongly influence student achievement, finding that the teacher-student relationship is more influential than most other factors including class size and homework. Later in a follow-up project, Hattie (2012) used that data to formulate concrete examples and suggestions for good teaching strategies. He suggested that teaching is most effective when teachers allow themselves to become learners by noticing and evaluating their own practices, and learners become teachers, by employing metacognitive strategies and using reciprocal teaching. His philosophy of the interchangeability of teacher as learner and learner as teacher underscores the reciprocal and dynamic nature of the teacher-student relationship.

In a 1999 qualitative study in the UK, Pomeroy looked at excluded secondary school students and found that they described their teachers' desirable and undesirable traits with a striking consistency. By and large, students' most common grievance was teachers not listening to them, not validating their opinions, and not adequately recognizing their social and emotional needs. The upshot of Pomeroy's (1999) study was that students consistently had more positive feelings about teachers who they perceived to establish a friendship with them, collapsing the social distance and relating to them less narrowly as mere students and more capaciously as people.

Studies on the teacher-student relationship in FL learning undertaken thus far have shown results which follow a similar pattern on the teacher's end. In a study by Gkonou and Mercer (2018), the authors conducted class

observations and interviews of six EFL teachers in different international contexts who had participated in a larger study funded by the British Council (Gkonou & Mercer, 2017). The teachers in the study all recognized the importance of positive relationships with their students and recognized the importance of teacher empathy. The authors concluded that in addition to teacher emotional intelligence, teacher social intelligence, which deals with the effective management of interpersonal relationships, had a strong effect on teacher-student relationships.

On an interesting side note, although not asked explicitly, the teachers interviewed in Gkonou and Mercer's (2018) study often cited the quality of their own personal relationships outside the classroom as influential factors in their professional practice. They described how moral support from colleagues, friends, and spouses/partners helped make them better teachers (Gkonou & Mercer, 2018, p. 70), which lends credence to relational theory and the idea of the relational matrix in language learning and teaching.

A tricky question in the teacher-student relationship is what constitutes appropriate social and emotional distance. Clearly teachers and students both want good relationships, but some personal distance is not only necessary but often mutually desired, and teachers must tactfully balance authority with approachability. Regarding adult learners, teachers and students may have different expectations of the relationship, as well as different needs and goals. Dewaele (2020) touches on the dynamic nature of supervisor and supervisee in PhD advising, and how the relationship can change over time. He points out that uncertainty of the role of the supervisor is common, both to the supervisor and the supervisee:

A recurrent theme is the uncertainty that both students and supervisors have about supervisory roles and expectations. Supervisors can be faced with unexpected ethical dilemmas about supervisory boundaries, notably the responsibility to ensure that the work meets certain academic standards and the students' responsibility to reach those standards. Another question is that of the multiple roles and responsibilities of the supervisor and student and the inevitable lack of consensus regarding their appropriacy. Do supervisors assume the role of a parent or a guru or a friend? Do they

treat their students as children or disciples or friends?  
(p. 155)

Despite the bidirectional nature of the relationship, teachers are usually the ones who are more in control of the emotional atmosphere of the classroom. Research has demonstrated that teachers directly influence FL enjoyment (FLE) (Dewaele et al., 2018; Dewaele et al., 2019; Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2014) by facilitating learning, making learners more relaxed and receptive to learning new things (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2016), and increasing attention (Gregersen & MacIntyre, 2014). In a positive teacher-student relationship, the teacher's role would be that of a facilitator or partner, because "when the teacher is no longer the master, but a learning partner, generative relationships blossom" (Gergen, 2020, p. 25).

### Applying Relational Theory to FL Learning

In order for students to learn anything, they must be meaningfully engaged, and "engagement is relational. In other words, students' enthusiasm, curiosity, interest and care for learning tend to derive from relationships" (Gill & Gergen, 2020, p. 404). In the field of applied linguistics, there is an established and rapidly growing body of research on the importance of relationships on FL learner emotions (Dewaele & Mercer, 2018; Gkonou, 2021; Gkonou & Mercer, 2018). With particular regard to foreign language classroom anxiety (FLCA), students' relative standing amongst peers is a strong predictor, and in FLE, teacher characteristics and behavior are stronger predictors (Dewaele et al., 2018; Dewaele et al., 2019), underscoring the importance of relationships in learner classroom emotions and the relational matrix in FL learning.

Dewaele and Dewaele (2020) conducted a study of 40 learners taught by two different teachers, finding that "variation in FLE is strongly related to the teacher" (p. 57). In a mixed-methods study of FLE and FLCA, Dewaele and MacIntyre (2019) analyzed data from 750 international FL learners, looking at both psychological and classroom-specific variables. They found that student attitude towards the teacher strongly predicted FLE, accounting for 24% of the variance. FLCA was most strongly predicted by the personality trait of emotional stability, which accounted for 30% of the variance, but relative standing amongst peers accounted for 9% of the variance. This can be understood to

mean that the teacher-student relationship is more influential on FLE, but the influence of peer relationships is also influential in FLCA. Similar results of teacher influence on FLE have emerged in various other cultural contexts, such as with Kazakh learners of Turkish (Dewaele, Özdemir et al., 2022) and Chinese EFL learners (Jiang & Dewaele, 2019; Jin & Zhang, 2021; Li et al., 2018; Li et al., 2019).

Given the power of the teacher to influence student emotion, it is logical to expect that the student's relationship with the teacher will also influence student motivation, especially as motivation in L2 learning has been described as having emotional appraisal at its basis (Schumann, 1997), which is also crucial for relationships in the context concerned. In general, students and teachers have been shown to be linked emotionally (Dresel & Hall, 2013; Frenzel & Stephens, 2013), and positive emotions from the teacher have also been shown to influence students. Moskowitz and Dewaele (2021) found that students who perceive their teachers to be happier self-report more positive attitudes towards FL learning and higher levels of motivation. Dewaele and MacIntyre (2019) found that happier teachers made the classroom atmosphere more enjoyable, which had a motivating effect on students. Teachers who are happier and more easygoing seem to offer their students an open endorsement to risk taking by increasing playfulness and positive feelings in the classroom (Dewaele, 2015).

While positive emotions such as enjoyment may be a source of motivation, Resnik and Dewaele (2020) contend that moderate levels of anxiety are not necessarily an insurmountable obstacle:

It may make learners' heart beat faster, it sharpens their senses, it makes them focus on the task at hand, comparable to walking on a rope (with a safety harness) at great height in full public view. (p. 11)

FLCA is attributable to various factors such as proficiency level and personality, though it is also firmly linked to relational factors, such as fear of losing face amongst peers, and fear of being negatively judged by peers and teachers (Horwitz et al., 1986) which indicates that even the motivating effects of moderate anxiety as proposed by Resnik and Dewaele (2020) can be understood in relational terms.

From the perspective of relational psychology, human relationships are fundamental to understanding why we behave the way we do and what shapes our motivation. It is worthwhile to note that relational theory recognizes the importance of relationships both as they are and as they might be imagined in the minds of individuals (Gergen, 2009). Indeed, teacher-student relationships in FL learning are embedded within a wider context, and may not always be mutually understood or experienced. Even adult learners may often be negotiating themselves in the minds of their teachers, and learners may seek praise or positive feedback from teachers as a displaced way of trying to achieve self-acceptance. Nonetheless, in the context of FL learning, the teacher-student relationship is instrumental to shaping student motivation, and students notice and value teacher emotion as it textures that relationship.

### The Current Study

The current study was inspired by the results of a larger quantitative study (Moskowitz, 2021) that explored the effect of student perception of teacher emotion on student attitudes and motivation. Results from that study showed that how students perceived teacher emotional intelligence had a significant effect on the students' own motivation, specifically the factors of teacher sociability and teacher self-control which taken together accounted for 46% of the variance, a large effect size. The results of perceived teacher happiness from the same study were smaller but still significant: students who perceived their teachers to be more satisfied with their own lives reported more positive feelings themselves, accounting for 7% of the variance, a small to medium effect size. From these results, the emotional valence of the teacher-student relationship emerged as a key factor in predicting student motivation. The current study aims to provide a more granular understanding of the motivational role of the teacher-student relationship in foreign language learning, which is "a fundamentally social process" (Morita, 2012, p. 26). While much important research has been undertaken both on L2 motivation, and on the teacher-student relationship, the current paper is situated in the novel position of applying a psychoanalytic theory to FL learning motivation with a focus on the teacher-student relationship. Because there are currently so few specific research precedents in

existence, we focus our attention on one main research question:

RQ: Does the quality of the interpersonal relationship between students and teachers matter to student motivation?

Based on past research, we hypothesize that students will report that their interpersonal relationship with their teachers, however they are perceived by the student, will influence student motivation. We predict that teacher behavior within the context of that relationship will have the power to both positively and negatively affect student motivation.

## METHOD

### Participants

A total of eight participants answered questions about their current English teachers, and responses were chosen for inclusion in the final analysis based on interest and relevance of answers. The participants all took part in the original quantitative study, however they were required to be enrolled in an EFL class at the time of participation in the open-ended survey and were instructed to answer questions based on their current English teacher so that recall would not be an issue. Participants were also required to be above the age of 18 and of at least intermediate-level English proficiency. They were asked to rate their own level of English both independent of their peers and compared to their peers on a scale of 1-5 (1 = lowest; 5 = highest). Additionally, they indicated their first language (L1) and the overall number of languages known. The demographic background and language learner history of participants are summarized in Table 1.

### Instrument and Procedure

The open-ended survey consisted of nine total questions (see Appendix) formulated on the basis of the results of the quantitative study (Moskowitz, 2021) to get a sense of the respondents' takes on their own learning situations, in their own voices and with their own styles of talking (Creswell, 2015). Due to the length of the open-ended survey, it was supplied to participants via email, meant to function as

online interviews (Rose et al., 2020), whose analysis was approached with the research question already in mind and codes predetermined. This method was chosen because it allowed for respondents to answer more questions, with more depth, and at their own convenience. Another advantage to using online interviews is that it affords complete anonymity to participants, thereby decreasing the tendency for prestige bias and other social biases in participants' answers (Garrett et al., 2003). This method was deemed effective as the researchers hoped to obtain answers from respondents that were as honest as possible, representing both positive and negative experiences.

As the current study deals with the interpersonal nature of the teacher-student relationship, only the answers from the pertinent questions were analyzed. The themes predetermined in the current paper were based on Moskowitz's (2021) quantitative findings, thus confirmatory data analysis was used. The analysis is hypothesis-driven, guided by patterns and ideas the researchers wanted to further explore (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011).

**Table 1.** *Participant Background Information*

Initials	Gender	Age	L1	Additional languages known including English	Age started learning English	Rating of own English level	Rating of own English level compared to peers
PN	F	21	Japanese	1	4	3	4
MM	F	34	Spanish	2	12	3	3
CV	F	21	French	3	11	5	4
CC	F	28	Chinese	2	12	4	4
JK	F	23	German / Spanish	2	3	4	5
GM	F	27	German	1	19	3	4
KS	F	21	German	1	9	4	5
GD	F	27	German	2	10	4	4

### Qualitative Analysis

The method used to analyze the data was qualitative content analysis (QCA), a technique with flexibility to utilize data from different sources in order to “develop new knowledge gleaned from context-sensitive interpretation of data” (Selvi, 2020, p. 445). As Selvi (2020) describes it, what is unique about QCA is that “while the quantitative version places emphasis on manifest meaning, QCA takes this emphasis to the next level by developing latent meaning, which can be

best understood in a context-dependent fashion” (p. 442). Selvi (2020) also notes that “QCA is concerned with providing a comprehensive and nuanced description of the data under scrutiny. This necessitates the development of a coding frame based (and tried out) on the actual data of the main study” (p. 442). The coding frame essentially serves as the “backbone” used to categorize and make sense of the data.



The data were analyzed using a theory-driven approach with an analytical procedure based on the steps outlined by Selvi (2020) for the deductive approach to QCA. First, the research question was established and the researchers familiarized themselves with the data. Then, based on the previously analyzed results of the larger quantitative study, a coding scheme was put into place with themes pre-established. Finally, the hypothesis was tested based on the coded data, and results were reported.

In order to explore the question of the effect of the teacher-student relationship on student motivation, the two themes explored were:

1. Influence of teacher behavior on student motivation. Both teachers and students influence each other mutually in a bidirectional relationship; however, respondents were all students and were thus asked to report on their perspectives in the teacher-student relationship.

2. Interpersonal relationship with the teacher. The quantitative findings of Moskowitz's (2021) study revealed that teacher sociability was highly influential in student attitudes and motivation. Moreover, Pomeroy's (1999) study also illustrated the importance of teachers taking a personal interest in students and their lives beyond the classroom. Given the importance of relationships in FL learning, this theme was included to elicit students' feelings about the matter.

As per the results of the original quantitative study, the open-ended survey contained questions dealing with how students perceive teacher emotional intelligence and happiness; however, only answers pertinent to the two current aforementioned themes were reported. Responses were viewed through the lens of relational theory, namely the notion that relationships with others are a prime source of motivation. While some questions asked explicitly about motivation, others did not, which allowed the possibility for the topic to come out organically without prompting.

## RESULTS

### Influence of Teacher Behavior on Student Motivation

Respondents described how they were motivated by their teacher's classroom behavior (see, e.g., CV's explanation),

with one respondent, CC, also mentioning her teacher's own achievements as a motivating factor. Although she did not particularly like the teacher, she was motivated by the fact that the teacher's L1 was not English, yet he had achieved a very high level of proficiency.

CC, female, 28: My English teacher is a non-native teacher. But his English is quite close to a native speaker, especially on the aspect of pronunciation and English thinking styles. So I really admire his English ability. Because of the admiration, I want my English to be as good as this teacher in the future.

CV, female, 24: Classes were very interesting and entertaining thanks to her way of animating the lectures with interesting and concrete details or funny anecdotes. It has sort of reactivated my motivation to attend this kind of classes and made me participate a bit more than usual. My motivation to keep on studying English and my global attitude toward English have always been here, so this class did not especially impacted [sic] it, but it dealt with interesting aspects that I would not have thought of before.

This theme is also echoed in another response. PN writes of her teacher's unpredictability in the classroom as a motivating factor, supporting past research on the teacher's behavior as a source of FLE (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2014). In the response below, she writes about how she enjoys interacting with her fellow classmates during group discussions, which are facilitated by the teacher, thus pointing towards the importance of the relational matrix in the classroom.

PN, female, 28: I love how he makes us discuss in little groups after watching short films because I get to interact with other students by doing so...I did not lose my motivation all through last semester. I was excited to go to each class because I knew my teacher would introduce interesting short films. Most of [the] materials he used were things I have not seen before (it's amazing how he does this) and, every time, he made sure that almost all the students have not seen those videos before we watch them as well.

One participant whose English class was given in a large lecture hall with over 100 students commented that due to the high number of students in the class, there was little opportunity to form a close teacher-student relationship, but the teacher's behavior still had a positive effect on her.

CV, female, 24: It was a lecture with nearly one hundred people in the classroom, so she could not focus on some precise people but at least she was smiling and present. She made me participate a bit more than usual, but we were numerous and I preferred hearing the others and the teachers. Yet, it had an effect on my performance during the exams, indirectly thanks to the way of leading classes.

Another respondent commented that despite her own occasional negative feelings about studying English, her positive regard for her teacher is enough to motivate her to keep going and look on the bright side:

GM, female, 27: I am definitely more motivated to do homework and the like because of my positive feelings towards my teacher. I still do not talk in class unless I have to, but that is a personal matter rather than a motivational one. Teachers like her give me back some motivation to continue my studies despite the many aspects I do not like about studying English. They show me it is not all bad.

Several respondents commented on the negative side. CC said that through his own intimidating behavior in the classroom, her teacher had the power to stoke her anxiety. She described how the teacher's excessive strictness was demotivating and had a diminishing effect on her attention. Curiously though, despite her consternation, she added that she felt happy when he complimented her, which aligns with the idea of the importance of teachers taking a personal interest in their students, and the relational concept of the self existing in relation to others:

CC, female, 28: He is very strict. Sometimes, I feel relaxed if the class is cancelled. Sometimes the pressure I feel from his attitude drive[s] my attention away uncontrollably. And [I] avoid answering his questions. I feel a little stressful if the teacher's expression shows he didn't understand what I said. And my brain will become blank when

he tries to see my memo. I feel happy when he says some compliments to me.

CC seems to have an ambivalent relationship with her teacher. While he had the power to stir anxiety and apprehension, she was also motivated by his own English ability, recognizing the effort and perseverance necessary for an FL user to achieve his level of proficiency. CC's complex feelings point towards an interesting tension; she dislikes her teacher yet appreciates his taking a personal interest in her and is still motivated by his accomplishments. This supports the notion that EFL teachers can have a strong positive effect on their students by serving as role models for language learning.

Another respondent is blunt about the negative effects her teacher has on her motivation:

JK, female, 23: My dislike for this teacher is more present than my respect. Due to this, I'm never too pleased when I'm on my way to those classes, nor do I find the topic interesting...it has a negative effect on my performance. As I dread her classes due to her attitude I prepare tasks last minute and do not invest as much time as I do in other classes where I get a better vibe from the teachers.

In a similar negative vein, GD writes about her teacher's negative effect on her motivation, citing the teacher's insults, lack of fairness, and inability to empathize with students:

GD, female, 27: [The teacher is] very mean and insulting towards students. Grading is very subjective and random without any positive reinforcement (solely negative feedback such as: your level of English is not sufficient for you to be studying at this University). I just wanted to be done with the whole course and even drop out at some point. She regards herself very highly and will never be able to put herself into the shoes of a student.

### **Interpersonal Relationship with Teachers**

The importance of the interpersonal relationship between students and teachers was repeatedly affirmed in the participants' answers, emphasizing the value of teachers transcending their roles as educators. PN wrote of how she

admired her teacher before he was even her teacher, which led her to take his class. She points out that her teacher demonstrated a specific interest in her life, by asking her questions about herself and attempting to get to know her better, which made her feel validated:

PN, female, 28: When I met my teacher for the first time, he was not my English teacher yet. Even though it was the first time we talked, he began to ask me questions about me and we got to know each other. My teacher is a tall and bulky guy with a mustache so his looks intimidated me a little to be honest. However, I could tell that he is friendly from his voice and expressions. As I got to know him more, I began to want to take his class and I was finally able to take his class last semester.

The theme of the interpersonal relationship is also present in MM's response. She mentions that she met her teacher in a casual, friendly setting outside of class, which served to cultivate a relationship, boost her motivation and promote her positive feelings about the class in general:

MM, female, 34: I had not been able to go through a strong [motivational period], and the teacher took an interest in me, offered me five minutes to go buy a coffee and I wait a couple of minutes to start the class. After this, the class itself was also very rewarding, as she explained everything very well, joked and was aware of our reactions. I never leave class with doubts.

In the following response, KS illustrates the power of her teacher to motivate her by recognizing her as not merely a student, but a well-rounded human being with feelings and a full life beyond the classroom. Her response combines the themes of teachers motivating students and the importance of the interpersonal relationship between teachers and students:

KS, female, 21: She seems to be very interested in keeping her students on top of work and while I feel like she demands a lot of us, she seems to be understanding and fair as well. As soon as I feel like a teacher does see me as a student and a human being with emotions and a life, I feel a lot more motivated to work accordingly. As soon as a teacher is nice towards their students, I more easily feel motivated to do the assigned work as to not disappoint someone who brought forward sympathy, humor and

passion for teaching, etc. The course I am taking currently was certainly not my first choice and I was rather disappointed to be entering it but since the teacher is very good at what she's doing, my interest in the topic was created.

As far as the negative effect of a bad teacher-student relationship is concerned, JK describes her teacher's lack of empathy for her students:

JK, female, 23: The teacher does not seem to be interested in our feelings towards her. She tends to be quite stressed during and after class and barely has time for us. She generally seems to be a very cold person. Whenever fellow students (and myself) have questions, she never seems to bother nor does she try to find solutions for students' problems.

## DISCUSSION

The current study is rooted in the theoretical framework of relational theory, which emphasizes the primacy of interpersonal relationships, stresses the role of those relationships as a key driver in motivation, and "views mind as fundamentally dyadic and interactive; above all else, mind seeks contact, engagement with other minds. Psychic organization and structures are built from the patterns which shape those interactions" (Mitchell, 1988, p. 3). The data collected point strongly towards the importance of engagement with others, the relational matrix, and the motivational influence of the teacher-student relationship in FL learning.

The singular RQ dealt with the influence of the interpersonal relationship between students and teachers on student motivation. Respondents showed appreciation for their teachers' awareness of their own emotions, and the emotional mood of the class as a whole. From a relational perspective, respondents seem to be saying that the teachers whom they appreciate are keenly aware of the importance of both the relational matrix of the class, and of their own direct relationship with the student. This supports Gergen's (2009) notion that learning takes place within a framework of relational processes and that educators should focus less on the individual as an isolated unit and more on the relational.

With regard to foreign language classroom anxiety (FLCA), CC mentioned that despite being motivated by her teacher due to his own accomplishments, his general behavior in the classroom was extremely anxiety inducing. Conversely, GM who is quite fond of her teacher stated that she “still [does] not talk in class unless I have [she has] to, but that is a personal matter rather than a motivational one.” Both responses underscore the complex nature of anxiety in FL learning. In particular, GM’s response supports the notion that FLCA is more trait-like and more influenced by learner internal variables than teacher-related variables (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2019; Dewaele & Dewaele, 2020).

As Gergen (2020) theorized, learning is strongest when teachers are seen as partners rather than masters, and past research has shown that students value teachers who are able to collapse the social distance between themselves and their students by taking a personal interest in their students’ lives (Pomeroy, 1999). KS, who had very positive feelings about her teacher, sums this up perfectly in her reflective statement: “As soon as I feel like a teacher does see me as a student and a human being with emotions and a life, I feel a lot more motivated to work accordingly.” The theme of the interpersonal relationship reverberated throughout participants’ responses and as hypothesized, respondents reported feeling more positively about teachers who took a personal interest in them either through the use of compliments (CC), taking time outside of class to connect (MM) or simply asking questions about them (PN).

MM’s response was particularly telling. She wrote of feeling almost burnt out in her studies, until her teacher “took an interest” in her and spent “five minutes” having a coffee with her before class. These ostensibly minor gestures on the teacher’s part had a turnaround effect on MM’s low motivation, leading her to feel more positive about the class. The potential power of the teacher-student relationship to motivate even with the teacher’s use of seemingly minor personal overtures is evident in MM’s experience.

Similarly, CC wrote that she felt stress “if the teacher’s expression shows he didn’t understand what I said,” yet, she also feels motivated when the same teacher compliments her. This tension between stress and motivation, negative and positive, illustrates how bound up in the teacher-student relationship FL students often are, and how the student’s thoughts and behaviors are largely influenced by relational

factors. The teacher’s behavior and CC’s responses to it not only shaped her behavior but molded the relationship itself, at least in CC’s mind. In line with relational theory, her experience of herself in the classroom seems to be relationally bound.

The current study is certainly not without some limitations. While the eight case studies allowed in-depth insights into the perceptions of these individual learners as such, future studies could focus on face-to-face interviews, which might yield a more nuanced picture due to their interactive nature and oral mode, which would allow for further elaboration. For a more well-rounded picture of the teacher-student relationship and how it affects motivation, future research might also consider taking into account teacher testimonies alongside those of students to add balance and texture to the data. Additionally, as with most non-mandatory surveys, there was an unavoidable self-selection bias among respondents. Students who had strong feelings about their teachers, both positively and negatively, were more likely to respond than those who were simply apathetic. Nevertheless, the respondents answered the questions thoughtfully and clearly, offering a valuable glimpse into their perceptions of their relationships with their teachers.

## CONCLUSION

This study explored the role of the teacher-student relationship in EFL learners’ motivation based on the framework of relational theory (Gergen, 2020; Greenberg & Mitchell, 1983). More specifically, the importance of learners’ perception of their teacher’s emotions in shaping their relationship was investigated and so was the link between the quality of this relationship and learner’s motivation. A qualitative content analysis (Selvi, 2020) of eight EFL learners’ responses to open-ended questions provided a granular understanding of the influential role of relational processes (Gill & Gergen, 2020) in foreign language learning trajectories. It revealed that the learners valued their teachers’ abilities to empathize and cultivate positive relationships with students, thereby recognizing the importance of the relational matrix (Gergen, 2009) in the EFL classroom and the fundamentally social nature of FL learning (Morita, 2012). Additionally, the findings supported Gergen’s (2020) assumption of the crucial role of power relations in classrooms: The learners reported

appreciating their teacher's taking interest in their personal lives (Pomeroy, 1999) and they admired those teachers who managed to bond with them by reducing the social distance and common hierarchies, which they reported having a positive impact on their motivation. The opposite was shown, too: Intimidating teachers can have a demotivating effect on learners.

Overall, the results demonstrate that the impact of the relational matrix (Mitchell, 1988) should not be underestimated in shaping learners' motivation and their emotions and the crucial role teachers' emotional and social intelligence (see, e.g., Gkonou & Mercer, 2017) plays in these processes needs to be communicated to teachers across the globe. While the student-teacher relationship is a reciprocal one, the teacher plays a powerful role in this respect, similar to the role a conductor plays in the orchestra (Dewaele, 2020). Thus, besides selecting classroom material their learners find interesting and intriguing, the present study showed it is imperative for teachers to bond with their students, be able to put themselves in their shoes (see, e.g., Hattie, 2012) and show genuine interest in them as a good relationship between the teacher and students seems to be an important driver of learners' motivation.

By and large, motivation seems to evolve dynamically, is complex and is, as the findings demonstrated, established relationally and just as the teacher's behavior and attitudes

influence the learners, this influence is bi-directional and co-constitutive, meaning neither the role of the teacher nor that of the learner can be regarded in isolation in these processes – they are in constant interplay, which again highlights the great relevance of relations in the EFL classroom for learners and teachers alike. Previous research, for instance, showed that learner and teacher emotions in the FL classroom are contagious (Moskowitz & Dewaele, 2021) and, as the teacher-student relationship seems to be a true confluence and highly relevant for learners' motivation, future research could investigate the relation between EFL learners' and EFL teachers' motivation in depth, too, as positive relationships have been shown to have a positive impact on teachers as well (Day & Gu, 2010; O'Connor, 2008; Veldman, 2013). Furthermore, the present study captured learners' perceptions and it would be equally interesting to investigate teachers' perceptions in future research to see if their attitudes are in line or differ.

To conclude, this study showed that the teacher-student relationship plays a key role in EFL learning motivation. Future studies could also explore the role of the relation between peers in the FL classroom with regard to learners' motivation and possibly influential relations outside the walls of the classroom, such as those between learners and parents and significant others, as all relationships are potential building blocks in FL learners' motivation.

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### **Authors' contributions**

SM conceived of the original study and JD, offered guidance and feedback on the design and execution of the study. SM, JD and PR contributed to the data collection and analysis and drafting of the manuscript. All authors read and approved of the final manuscript.

### **Ethics Approval & Consent to Participate**

This study was approved by the University Research Ethics Committee from the first author's research institution. All participants provided informed consent prior to participating in the study.

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## APPENDIX

Follow up questions:

1. What were your general feelings about your English teacher?
2. How did those feelings impact your motivation in the class?
3. Your motivation to study English in the future?
4. Your overall attitude toward English?
5. Do you think your English teacher was able to read the emotional atmosphere of the classroom? Why/why not?
6. Do you think your teacher was aware of your own moods and feelings? Why/why not?
7. Do you think it's important for an English teacher to be a happy person? Why/why not?
8. Did your English teacher's behavior have an effect on your performance in the class? If so, how?
9. Any other comments you would like to add?