

Institutional Support, Teacher Sustainability, and Student English Learning Motivation: A Small-Scale Cross-Cultural Comparison of China and Latvia

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Abstract: Teacher wellbeing and student motivation are both critical concerns in language education, yet they are often treated separately. This small-scale cross-cultural study investigates whether teacher sustainability mediates the relationship between institutional support and students' motivation to learn English. Data were collected from two distinct instructional contexts — China (EFL) and Latvia (ESL-like) — via a cross-sectional survey of 150 teacher – student dyads (China: $n = 80$; Latvia: $n = 70$) from secondary English classrooms. Mediation was tested using bootstrapped regression, and cross-cultural differences in path coefficients were examined with interaction terms. Results indicate that institutional support positively predicts teacher sustainability, which in turn positively predicts student English motivation. In both countries, teacher sustainability fully mediates the link between support and motivation. Regarding cross-cultural patterns, the mediation structure remains invariant, yet the strength of the support-for-sustainability paths is significantly larger in Latvia ($\beta = 0.59$) than in China ($\beta = 0.42$). This difference appears to be driven by Latvian teachers' stronger positive response to autonomy support, whereas Chinese teachers place relatively greater value on administrative efficiency. Despite the modest sample size, these findings point to a universal pathway from school support to student engagement via teacher sustainability, while also revealing culturally sensitive leverage points. Implications for English language policy and teacher development are discussed.

Keywords: institutional support, teacher sustainability, English learning motivation, cross-cultural comparison, secondary education

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1. Introduction

Global English language teaching is currently facing a dual crisis: rising teacher burnout and declining learner motivation [1,2]. Although extensive research has examined teacher wellbeing and student engagement separately, the mechanisms that link school-level support to student outcomes -- especially in foreign or second language classrooms — remain theoretically underdeveloped [3]. Furthermore, most available evidence originates from Western, individualistic contexts, leaving open the question of how cultural and educational systems shape these dynamics.

The present study offers a small-scale cross-cultural comparison between China and Latvia in the domain of English learning. These two countries provide a theoretically

meaningful contrast. China represents a collectivist, high-stakes examination culture with centralised English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instruction. Latvia, a post-Soviet EU member state, exhibits more individualistic values and an English as a Second Language (ESL)-environment characterised by greater societal exposure to English [4, 5]. By focusing on secondary English classrooms—where teacher – student relationships are sustained and motivational dynamics are particularly critical—we aim to identify both universal and culture-specific pathways.

Given the exploratory nature and modest sample size (total N = 150 dyads), this study is positioned as a small-scale cross-cultural exploration intended to generate hypotheses and inform future larger-scale research. The following research questions guide the investigation:

1. Does institutional support positively predict teacher sustainability in English teaching in China and Latvia?
2. Does teacher sustainability positively predict student English learning motivation in both contexts?
3. Does teacher sustainability mediate the relationship between institutional support and student English motivation?
4. Do the strengths of these relationships differ between the two countries?

2. Literature Review and Hypotheses

2.1 Theoretical Framework: JD, SDT, and L2 Motivation

We integrate three theoretical perspectives that operate at different levels but collectively underpin the proposed mediation chain of “institutional support → teacher sustainability → student motivation.” The Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model [6] serves as the overarching framework at the institutional level, positing that job resources (e.g.(autonomy, administrative efficiency) buffer demands and foster teacher engagement. Self-Determination Theory (SDT) [7] provides the psychological mechanism at the teacher level, explaining how access to institutional resources satisfies teachers’ basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness, thereby enhancing their sustainability. Finally, Dörnyei’s L2 Motivational Self System [8] operates at the student level, outlining the components of student motivation (ideal L2 self, ought-to L2 self, and learning experience). The theoretical thread linking these theories is that institutional resources (JD-R) enable teacher need satisfaction (SDT), which in turn allows teachers to create a motivating classroom environment that shapes students’ L2 learning experience and motivation [8]. In this integrated view, teacher sustainability functions as the key mediating mechanism that translates institutional support into student motivational outcomes.

2.2 Institutional Support and Teacher Sustainability in English Teaching

Institutional support encompasses autonomy support, administrative efficiency, professional development, and emotional support [9]. In English teaching, these dimensions may operate differently across contexts. Chinese English teachers face rigid national curricula and high-stakes testing (the Gaokao), making administrative burden reduction and structured professional development especially valuable [10]. Latvian

English teachers enjoy greater curricular freedom but may lack systematic support, thus valuing autonomy and peer collaboration more [11].

Hypothesis 1 (H1): Institutional support positively predicts teacher sustainability in both countries, but the relative importance of its dimensions differs (autonomy > efficiency in Latvia; efficiency > autonomy in China).

2.3 Teacher Sustainability and Student English Motivation

Sustainable teachers — those with low burnout and high commitment — exhibit enthusiasm, employ varied activities, and provide autonomy-supportive feedback. These behaviours directly enhance students' intrinsic motivation to learn English [12, 13]. Emotional contagion theory suggests that teacher positivity transfers to learners, thereby increasing engagement.

Hypothesis 2 (H2): Teacher sustainability positively predicts student English learning motivation in both countries.

2.4 Mediation and Cross-Cultural Differences

We propose a full mediation model: institutional support affects student English motivation only through teacher sustainability. However, the first-stage path may differ across cultures. Given China's collectivism and high power distance, formal structural support (administrative efficiency, professional development) may matter more. In Latvia's more individualistic climate, autonomy support may be paramount.

Hypothesis 3 (H3): Teacher sustainability mediates the support-motivation link in both countries.

Hypothesis 4 (H4): The institutional support → teacher sustainability path is stronger in Latvia for autonomy support, and stronger in China for administrative efficiency.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design and Sample

A cross-sectional, comparative survey design was employed using teacher-student dyads from secondary English classrooms. Data were collected from two groups: Chinese secondary schools (80 dyads) and Latvian secondary schools (70 dyads), yielding a total of 150 valid dyads.

Sampling followed a stratified cluster approach based on urban or rural location and school track (academic or vocational). Within each selected school, English teachers were randomly sampled, and each teacher nominated one “target student” for whom they served as the primary English instructor. This dyadic design captures the teacher-student relational link while remaining feasible for a small-scale study. However, we acknowledge a potential selection bias: teachers may tend to nominate students with whom they have a good relationship, who perform actively, or who have higher English proficiency. The manuscript did not specify the nomination rule in the methodology section, and if a systematic bias exists in teacher selection, the path coefficient between teacher sustainability and student motivation may be overestimated. This limitation is addressed in Section 5.4. The sample distribution across strata is as follows: In China, 45

dyads were from urban schools and 35 from rural schools; 60 dyads were from academic tracks and 20 from vocational tracks. In Latvia, 48 dyads were from urban schools and 22 from rural schools; 55 dyads were from academic tracks and 15 from vocational tracks.

3.2 Participants

Teachers. The sample included 150 English teachers (68% female; mean age = 41.5 years, SD = 10.2; mean English teaching experience = 14.3 years, SD = 8.9). Chinese teachers ($n = 80$) and Latvian teachers ($n = 70$) did not differ significantly in gender distribution or years of experience ($p > .05$).

Students. The student sample comprised 150 students (55% female; mean age = 16.8 years, SD = 1.1). All were secondary students (grades 10–11 in China, grades 10–12 in Latvia).

3.3 Instruments

All instruments were translated and back-translated between English, Chinese, and Latvian following established guidelines [14]. A pilot test with 15 teachers and 15 students in each country confirmed clarity and appropriateness.

Institutional Support (8 items). This scale was adapted from Eisenberger et al. [15] and Collie et al. [16], capturing four dimensions with two items each:

Autonomy support (e.g., “I have freedom to choose teaching methods in the English class”)

Administrative efficiency (e.g., “Paperwork does not overwhelm my English teaching”)

Professional development (e.g., “My school provides meaningful professional development for English teachers”)

Emotional support (e.g., “Colleagues and supervisors care about my wellbeing”)

Responses were recorded on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree). Cronbach's α ranged from .86 to .89 across subscales.

Teacher Sustainability (6 items). This measure combined a reverse-scored version of the Maslach Burnout Inventory — General Survey [17] with items from the Teacher Wellbeing Scale [16]. It assessed professional efficacy (3 items) and organizational commitment (3 items) on a 7-point scale. Reliability coefficients (α) ranged from .88 to .91.

Student English Learning Motivation (5 items). Items were adapted from the Academic Motivation Scale [18] and L2 motivation items from Dörnyei [8]. The scale included two items for intrinsic motivation (e.g., “I learn English because I enjoy it”), one item for identified regulation (“Because English is important for my future”), and two reverse-scored items for amotivation. A composite score was used. The scale demonstrated good internal consistency ($\alpha = .87-.90$) on a 7-point Likert format.

Control variables. Teacher gender, teaching experience, school location (urban or rural), and school type (academic or vocational) were included as control variables in the analyses.

3.4 Data Analysis

Given the modest sample size, we avoided complex multi-group structural equation modelling with invariance constraints. Instead, the following analytical steps were taken.

First, descriptive statistics and correlations were computed separately for each country. Second, separate mediation models were estimated for China and Latvia using the PROCESS macro (Model 4) with 5,000 bootstrap samples. Third, cross-cultural comparisons were conducted using (a) Fisher's Z test for differences in correlations, and (b) ordinary least squares (OLS) regression with an interaction term (country × institutional support) predicting teacher sustainability, while controlling for the covariates. Fourth, an exploratory dimension-level analysis examined which specific support dimensions drove the observed cross-cultural differences.

Missing data accounted for less than 4% of the total responses and were handled by listwise deletion, which is considered robust given the small sample size. All analyses were performed using SPSS 28 and PROCESS v4.2.

4. Results

4.1 Descriptive Statistics and Preliminary Comparisons

Table 1. Means, standard deviations, and correlations (China above the diagonal, Latvia below)

Variable	M (China)	SD (China)	M (Latvia)	SD (Latvia)	1	2	3
1. Institutional support	4.95	1.15	5.08	1.09	–	.42**	.36**
2. Teacher sustainability	4.60	1.21	5.20	1.12	.56**	–	.48**
3. Student English motivation	4.75	1.22	5.25	1.08	.39**	.52**	–

Note:** $p < 0.01$. Independent-samples t -tests revealed that Chinese teachers reported significantly lower teacher sustainability than their Latvian counterparts, $t(148) = 3.21, p = 0.002$. Student English motivation was also lower in China, $t(148) = 2.74, p = 0.007$. No significant cross-country differences were observed for institutional support, $t(148) = 0.74, p = 0.46$.

4.2 Mediation Models (Separate by Country)

Mediation was tested using PROCESS Model 4 [19] with 5,000 bootstrap samples, separately for each country.

China ($n = 80$). Institutional support positively predicted teacher sustainability ($\beta = 0.42, SE = 0.09, p < .001$). Teacher sustainability, in turn, positively predicted student English motivation ($\beta = 0.48, SE = 0.10, p < .001$). When teacher sustainability was included in the model, the direct effect of institutional support on student motivation was non-significant ($\beta = 0.07, SE = 0.08, p = .38$). The indirect effect was significant ($\beta = 0.18, 95\% CI [0.09, 0.29]$), indicating full mediation.

Latvia ($n = 70$). Institutional support positively predicted teacher sustainability ($\beta = 0.56, SE = 0.08, p < .001$). Teacher sustainability positively predicted student English motivation ($\beta = 0.52, SE = 0.09, p < .001$). The direct effect of institutional support on motivation was not significant after accounting for the mediator ($\beta = 0.04, SE = 0.09, p = .65$). The indirect effect was significant ($\beta = 0.27, 95\% CI [0.16, 0.40]$), again supporting full mediation.

Thus, Hypotheses 2 and 3 were supported in both countries.

4.3 Cross-Cultural Comparison of Path Strengths

To formally test whether the path from institutional support to teacher sustainability differed significantly between countries, an ordinary least squares (OLS) regression was conducted. The model included country (0 = China, 1 = Latvia), mean-centred institutional support, their interaction term, and the control variables (teacher gender, experience, school location, and school type) as predictors of teacher sustainability.

The interaction term was significant ($\beta_{\text{interaction}} = 0.17$, $SE = 0.07$, $p = .014$), and it explained an additional 4% of the variance ($\Delta R^2 = .04$). Simple slope analysis revealed that the effect of institutional support on teacher sustainability was $\beta = 0.42$ in China and $\beta = 0.59$ in Latvia, with the difference being statistically significant ($p = .014$). In contrast, the path from teacher sustainability to student motivation did not exhibit a significant cross-country interaction ($p = .68$).

Dimension-level exploratory analysis. Being Given the exploratory nature of this small-scale study, we examined which specific dimensions of institutional support drove the observed cross-cultural difference. The effect of autonomy support on teacher sustainability was stronger in Latvia ($\beta = 0.44$, 95% CI [0.28, 0.60]) than in China ($\beta = 0.25$, 95% CI [0.10, 0.40]), with Fisher's Z test indicating a significant difference ($Z = 2.14$, $p = .032$). Conversely, the effect of administrative efficiency was stronger in China ($\beta = 0.32$, 95% CI [0.17, 0.47]) than in Latvia ($\beta = 0.18$, 95% CI [0.03, 0.33]), also significant ($Z = 1.98$, $p = .048$). Professional development ($\beta = 0.27$, 95% CI [0.12, 0.42] in China; $\beta = 0.22$, 95% CI [0.07, 0.37] in Latvia) and emotional support showed no significant cross-cultural differences. These patterns support Hypothesis 4.

4.4 Summary of Findings

Hypotheses 1, 2, and 3 were fully supported. Institutional support indirectly predicted student English motivation through teacher sustainability in both countries, with full mediation observed. Hypothesis 4 was also supported: the first-stage path (institutional support \rightarrow teacher sustainability) was significantly stronger in Latvia, primarily driven by autonomy support, whereas Chinese teachers responded more strongly to administrative efficiency. The second-stage path (teacher sustainability \rightarrow student motivation) was cross-culturally invariant.

5. Discussion

5.1 Key Findings and Interpretation

This small-scale cross-cultural comparison reveals that, despite a modest sample size, the fundamental mechanism -- institutional support fostering student English motivation by sustaining teachers -- holds in both China and Latvia. The full mediation pattern aligns with the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) and Self-Determination Theory (SDT) frameworks and extends their applicability to language education contexts. Importantly, the observed cultural differences in which dimensions of support matter most mirror theoretical expectations. Latvian English teachers, operating in a more

autonomous ESL-like environment, prioritize autonomy support, whereas their Chinese EFL counterparts, working under high-stakes testing pressure, place greater value on structural efficiency and professional development.

The invariance of the second stage (teacher sustainability → student motivation) suggests that sustainable English teachers universally create motivating classrooms, regardless of cultural context. This finding supports emotional contagion theory and the notion of need-supportive teaching as cross-culturally robust phenomena [12].

5.2 Comparison with Previous Research

Our findings replicate the full mediation pattern reported in a previous larger-scale study (502 dyads, general subjects) but extend it specifically to English language learning. The cultural dimension differences are also consistent with prior work. Wang and Hall [10] found that Chinese teachers' wellbeing was more closely tied to administrative support, while Skaalvik and Skaalvik [9] reported that Nordic teachers (whose cultural context shares similarities with Latvia) highly valued autonomy. The present study extends these patterns to second and foreign language teaching contexts.

5.3 Practical Implications for English Language Education

For China. Policymakers should consider reducing English teachers' non-teaching paperwork (e.g., test data entry, inspection preparation) and provide structured professional development tailored to examination reform. Rural schools, where teacher sustainability was lowest in the sample, would benefit from targeted support.

For Latvia. School leaders are advised to protect English teachers' pedagogical freedom -- for example, by allowing them to adapt instructional materials, choose assessment methods, and participate in curriculum decisions. Given the European Union's emphasis on learner autonomy, teacher autonomy may be viewed as a prerequisite for fostering student-centred classrooms.

For both contexts. Investing in teacher sustainability represents a lever for improving student English motivation. Low-cost interventions, such as workshops on emotion regulation and the establishment of collegial support groups, could be implemented to enhance teacher well-being.

5.4 Limitations and Future Research

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the dyad design in which each teacher nominated a target student carries a potential risk of selection bias. Teachers may tend to select students with whom they have a good relationship, who perform actively, or who have higher English proficiency. The manuscript did not specify the nomination rule in the methodology section, and if a systematic bias exists in teacher selection, the path coefficient between teacher sustainability and student motivation may be overestimated. Future research should adopt a random nomination procedure or aggregate multiple students per teacher to mitigate this bias. Second, the modest sample size (particularly per country) precluded multi-group structural equation modelling and formal testing of measurement invariance. Consequently, the findings should be treated as exploratory and require

replication with larger samples (e.g., $N > 200$ per country). Third, the cross-sectional design cannot confirm causal relationships. Fourth, English motivation was measured solely by self-report; future research incorporating behavioural measures (e.g. (effort, persistence) would strengthen the evidence base. Fifth, the dyad design assumed a one-to-one link between each teacher and a target student, whereas teachers typically influence multiple students. Future studies could adopt classroom-level aggregation or multilevel modelling.

Given these limitations, we encourage pre-registered replication studies employing larger samples and longitudinal designs.

6. Conclusion

In this small-scale cross-cultural exploration of secondary English classrooms in China and Latvia, we found that institutional support enhances student English learning motivation by sustaining teachers. The mediating role of teacher sustainability appears cross-culturally robust. However, the specific types of support that matter most are culture-sensitive: autonomy support for Latvia and administrative efficiency for China. Despite the modest sample, our results provide actionable insights for language education policy and illustrate the value of small-sample cross-cultural research as a hypothesis-generating tool. In a global context marked by English teacher shortages and learner disengagement, supporting teachers is not merely an ancillary concern — it represents a direct pathway to more motivated language learners.

Conflict of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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