



Original article

Self-Esteem, Achievement Goal Orientations, and Language Learning Among Iraqi EFL Learners: A Correlational Investigation



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ABSTRACT

This study examines the relationships among self-esteem, achievement goal orientations, and language achievement of 125 Iraqi EFL learners who were taking English language courses in language institutes in Iraq. The present study is designed in a quantitative, cross-sectional correlational design and follows the achievement goal theory, self-determination theory and self-worth theories. The Sorensen Self-Esteem Questionnaire, the Achievement Goal Orientation Inventory, and students' cumulative grade point average were used to gather data. The results of Pearson correlation analysis showed that there were strong positive relationships between self-esteem and both mastery goals and performance goals, as well as between self-esteem and language achievement. On the other hand, avoidance goals were negatively correlated with self-esteem and language achievement. The results highlight the significant role of affective and motivational dimensions in EFL learning and justify the applicability of goal orientation theory in the Iraqi EFL context. The study also provides implications for the classroom environment, assessment practices and teacher professional development.

Keywords: achievement goal orientations, EFL motivation, Iraqi learners, language achievement, self-determination theory, self-esteem, self-worth theory

تقدير الذات وتوجهات أهداف الإنجاز وتعلم اللغة لدى متعلمي اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية في العراق: دراسة ارتباطية

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المستخلص

تبحث هذه الدراسة العلاقة بين تقدير الذات وتوجهات أهداف الإنجاز والتحصيل في تعلم اللغة الإنجليزية لدى 125 متعلماً عراقياً للغة الإنجليزية بوصفها لغة أجنبية في معاهد اللغة داخل العراق. اعتمدت الدراسة المنهج الكمي بتصميم ارتباطي مقطعي، واستندت إلى نظرية أهداف الإنجاز ونظرية التحديد الذاتي ونظرية قيمة الذات. جمعت البيانات باستخدام استبانة سورنسون لتقدير الذات، ومقياس توجهات أهداف الإنجاز، والمعدل التراكمي للطلبة. أظهرت نتائج تحليل ارتباط بيرسون وجود علاقات إيجابية قوية بين أهداف الإتقان وتقدير الذات، وبين أهداف الأداء وتقدير الذات، وكذلك بين تقدير الذات والتحصيل اللغوي. في المقابل، ظهرت علاقات سلبية بين أهداف التجنب وكل من تقدير الذات والتحصيل اللغوي. تؤكد النتائج أهمية العوامل الوجدانية والدافعية في تعلم اللغة الإنجليزية، كما تدعم إمكانية تطبيق نظرية توجهات الأهداف في السياق العراقي. وتقدم الدراسة دلالات مهمة لتطوير البيئة الصفية وأساليب التقويم وبرامج التطوير المهني للمدرسين

الكلمات المفتاحية: توجهات أهداف الإنجاز، تعلم اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية، المتعلمون العراقيون، التحصيل اللغوي، نظرية تقرير المصير، تقدير الذات، نظرية قيمة الذات

1. Introduction

Individual-difference variables that have been investigated for their relationship with foreign language learning have received consistent attention in theory and research, particularly those that involve affect and motivation. Although structural factors such as quality of instruction, access to authentic input, frequency of exposure constrain the conditions under which learning takes place, they do not explain a significant amount of inter-learner variance. Much of this is due to the learner's internal processes: their own assessment of competence, the goals they have in engaging with the learning, and their emotional reactions to the learning challenges and failures that are inevitable in the process. Self-esteem and achievement goal orientations are two constructs of the inner landscape.

Self-esteem, the evaluative attitude of an individual toward his/her worth and ability (Rosenberg, 1965; Coopersmith, 1967), is a general moderator of learning behaviour. Positive self-esteem facilitates communicative risk-taking, allows for toleration of lack of competence, and transforms corrective feedback into learning materials, instead of threats to identity (Habratt, 2018; Brown, 2000). Achievement goal orientations as included in Elliot and McGregor's (2001) 2×2 framework represent the goals that learners set when they engage with learning: to gain real skill (mastery), to look good to others (performance), or to appear competent when they are not (avoidance). These orientations not only reflect motivational preferences, but also the level of cognitive processing, the level of effort, the emotional reaction to failure, and the quality of learning outcomes.

The context of Iraqi EFL is an interesting scenario to study the integrated motivational inquiry. Over the past few decades, the education system has been crippled by the disruption of geopolitics, which

has resulted in students' learning environments featuring large class sizes, less formative feedback, examination-driven assessment, and a limited exposure to authentic English input—all of which systematically challenge students' motivational needs, as identified by self-determination theory, and lead to fertile ground for the development of avoidance motivation. The Iraqi literature, despite all of this, is still sparse in the motivational study and no published research has investigated the three factors of self-esteem, goal orientations and language achievement together in one study.

This is because the present study aims to fill in this gap by answering the following research questions: (RQ1) What are the levels of self-esteem, achievement goal orientations, and language achievement among Iraqi EFL learners? (RQ2) Is there a significant relationship between self-esteem and language achievement? (RQ3) Is there a significant relationship between achievement goal orientations and language achievement? (RQ4) To what extent do self-esteem and achievement goal orientations predict language achievement? The study answers these questions and makes recommendations for EFL practice based on the empirical evidence for cross-culturally validating the motivational theory and providing recommendations for EFL practice in the context of post-conflict education.

Self-esteem and achievement goal orientation have been found to be significant factors separately with respect to EFL achievement in the literature (Nelson, 2005; Abu-Sada and Al Khudair, 2011) but have not been examined together in one model in the Iraqi EFL literature. In addition, the impact of the contextual factors in Iraqi educational system such as the high-stakes assessment culture, and the relative absence of formative assessment feedback in Iraqi EFL context could magnify the affective and motivational impact. The present study bridges both the theoretical gap (the synthesis of three motivational traditions) and geographical gap (the first evidence from the Iraqi EFL context).

2. Review of the Literature

This section synthesises theoretical and empirical research on the three core constructs: self-esteem in language learning, achievement goal orientations in EFL contexts, and their joint relationships with academic achievement. The review is organised thematically to foreground the research gap the present study addresses.

2.1 Self-Esteem and Language Learning

Brown (2000) pointed out that self-esteem was the most universal affective factor affecting human social engagement and suggested that in the language classroom, positive self-esteem must be achieved at a certain level for productive cognitive and emotional engagement to take place. He identified three hierarchically structured components of self-esteem: global, situational and task-specific, and differentiates their sensitivity to environmental feedback and their impact on learning behaviour. This taxonomy implies that the self-esteem–achievement relationship is not monolithic but depends on the level of self-esteem under investigation and the aspect of performance being assessed.

Research studies on the relationship between self-esteem and EFL achievement have been growing in number both within and beyond the skill domains and cultural contexts. The results show that global self-esteem significantly influenced speaking performance in Iranian EFL university learners, such that the more self-esteem the learners had, the more interactional risk they assumed and the more fluent they were in speaking, as found by Koosha et al. (2011). Narafshan and Noori (2018) did the same with writing performance and overall course performance and concluded that the self-esteem effects were greater in high evaluative pressure learning environments. According to the systematic review conducted by Habrat et al. (2018), the mechanisms through which self-esteem is related to its effect are believed to be: reducing anxiety, improving communication posture, increasing willingness to engage in challenging tasks, and improving resilience after failure.

There are conflicting views on the direction of the relationship between self-esteem and achievement. There are arguments to support both the view that positive self-regard precedes achievement, as proposed by Harter (1983), and the view that achievement precedes positive self-regard, as suggested by Baumeister et al. (2003). The self-determination theory of Deci and Ryan (2000) provides the most economical combination: it is two-way and self-reinforcing. This bidirectionality was confirmed by Dewaele and MacIntyre (2014) in the EFL classroom, who found that the emotion of enjoyment, which is directly related to situational self-esteem, explained the readiness to communicate and the gains in proficiency. Given that there are no studies that have been conducted on Arab EFL learners, the present study extended the findings of Pishghadam et al. (2021) who found that global self-esteem had a positive relationship with vocabulary knowledge and that task-specific self-esteem had a positive relationship with reading comprehension, and represented the closest empirical similarity to the present study.

2.2 Achievement Goal Orientations in EFL Contexts

Achievement goal theory was developed from Nicholls' (1984) concept of task-involved and ego-involved orientations and further conceptualized by Ames (1992) at the classroom level to explain how classroom structures influence the adoption of an achievement goal. Dweck (1986, 2000) combined goal orientations with implicit theories of intelligence, and observed that incremental theorists (those who believe that intelligence is malleable) tend to develop a mastery orientation, whereas entity theorists (those who believe that intelligence is fixed) are more likely to develop performance-avoidance orientations. The most comprehensive current model is the 2 x 2 matrix by Elliot and McGregor (2001) involving definition of competence (mastery vs. performance) and the valence of engagement (approach vs. avoidance) with four motivational profiles having different consequences for learning.

In EFL-specific research, mastery goals have been the most favorable mindset. In Iran, Zafarmand et al. (2014) found that mastery goals led to metacognitive awareness and self-efficacy which, in turn, led to language achievement of Iranian university EFL learners. In a large sample, longitudinal study, Luo et al. (2019) investigated the unique relationships of the three motivation types to gains in EFL proficiency at the end of the semester, with results showing that only the mastery goal uniquely predicted gains in proficiency and the avoidance goal uniquely predicted lower engagement, after

controlling for initial proficiency level. The relationship between tasks and the use of deep strategies and intrinsic motivation was most consistent when the task goal was mastery in Hulleman et al.'s (2010) meta-analysis of 243 studies, and least consistent when the task goal was performance avoidance. Moreover, Elliot et al. (2011) showed that the negative relationship between avoidance goals and achievement is moderated in cultures high in power distance, which is relevant to the Iraqi culture in education.

2.3 Self-Esteem and Goal Orientations: The Integrative Evidence

Despite the theoretical coherence of predictions linking self-esteem and goal orientations, their joint empirical examination is comparatively rare. Covington (2000) argued theoretically that self-worth protection is the primary motivational goal in evaluative contexts, generating the prediction that low self-esteem drives avoidance motivation while high self-esteem enables approach-oriented engagement. Moriya (2019) provided rare longitudinal evidence: mastery goal pursuit predicted self-esteem growth at mid-semester among Japanese EFL learners, which in turn predicted oral proficiency at course end—evidence of the bidirectional self-reinforcing cycle that self-determination theory and self-worth theory jointly predict.

Alivernini and Lucidi (2011) found across Italian school students that mastery goals and self-esteem formed a coherent motivational cluster jointly predicting academic outcomes, while avoidance goals formed a distinct cluster associated with negative affect and underperformance. Duda and Nicholls (1992) showed that in collectivist cultures, task and ego orientations show higher co-occurrence—a finding that anticipates the elevated mastery–performance intercorrelation observed in the present study. No prior investigation has examined this integrated system in Iraqi EFL learners, whose educational culture—strong face-saving norms, hierarchical teacher–student relationships, examination-dominated assessment—creates conditions in which avoidance motivation and self-protective self-esteem management may be both more prevalent and more consequential than in Western samples.

3. Theoretical Framework

The present study is grounded in three converging theoretical traditions that jointly account for the predicted relationships among self-esteem, achievement goal orientations, and language learning achievement. These traditions are not independent: they illuminate different facets of the same motivational system and together generate a set of specific, testable predictions.

3.1 Achievement Goal Theory (Elliot & McGregor, 2001)

This study is based mainly on the theoretical background of achievement goal theory. The 2×2 model presented by Elliot and McGregor (2001) is based on two orthogonal dimensions: definition of competence (mastery—self-referenced improvement—versus performance—normative comparison—with peers) and valence of engagement (approach—seeking positive outcomes—versus avoidance—evading negative ones). To match previous studies (Midgley et al., 1998), the three

operationally relevant orientations are defined as mastery-approach, performance-approach and performance-avoidance (hereafter 'avoidance'). The model suggests that mastery goals will trigger deep cognitive processing, intrinsic motivation to challenge, and positive emotion in relation to the challenge; performance goals will trigger short-term evaluative success in competitive situations; and avoidance goals will trigger ego-defensive behaviour, increased anxiety, and decreased achievement. Ames' (1992) empirical extension of the theory at the classroom level suggests that instructional climate can influence the motivational orientations of learners by what teachers choose to say, what they let students do and how they assess students.

3.2 Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000)

The motivational substrate between self-esteem and goal orientations is self-determination theory (SDT). SDT identifies three basic psychological needs that must be met in order to have autonomous motivation and psychological well-being: autonomy (volition over action), competence (experienced effectiveness), and relatedness (meaningful connection with others). If these needs are met in the learning context, then learners will most likely internalize mastery-oriented goals, positive self-regard, and be intrinsically motivated. In high-stakes, assessment contexts as common in control contexts, learners are motivated to adopt controlled regulation or a motivated regulation, which are structurally parallel to performance-avoidance orientation. The theoretical significance for this study is that there is a common motivational foundation between self-esteem and mastery goal pursuit: self-confident and self-autonomous learners acquire positive self-regard and a mastery goal orientation through need satisfaction. This common substrate results in the prediction of positive correlation between self-esteem and mastery goals, which is supported in the present findings.

3.3 Self-Worth Theory (Covington, 2000)

The negative relationship between self-esteem and avoidance goal is best explained by self-worth theory. Achievement settings have been viewed by the protection of self-worth, which involves a person's sense of competence and the social value derived from that competence (Covington, 2000). Learners with low or fragile self-esteem are particularly susceptible to the humiliation and disrespect that can stem from failure, as failure can be viewed as a sign of basic failure. To avoid this inference, they will engage in avoidance strategies that help prevent themselves from attributing failure to inability, but also prevent them from learning, such as avoiding the goal, engaging in self-handicapping, and withdrawing from the effort. Self-worth theory also helps to account for the two-way relationship between self-esteem and achievement: When people avoid tasks that could lead to achievement, they will not develop a sense of real accomplishment, which will maintain low self-esteem. This vicious cycle is the motivational process that the present study aims at documenting and interrupting by means of pedagogical implications.

3.4 Conceptual Model

The integrated theoretical framework for the present study is shown in Figure 1. Both self-esteem and goal orientations are perceived as reciprocal predictors and predictors of one another (through cycles of SDT and self-worth theory) and together predict language achievement. All pathways of this model are explained by the three theoretical traditions and are mutually reinforcing. The correlational design is used to determine the presence and direction of these relationships, and the theoretical framework is the interpretative framework that gives meaning to these relationships.

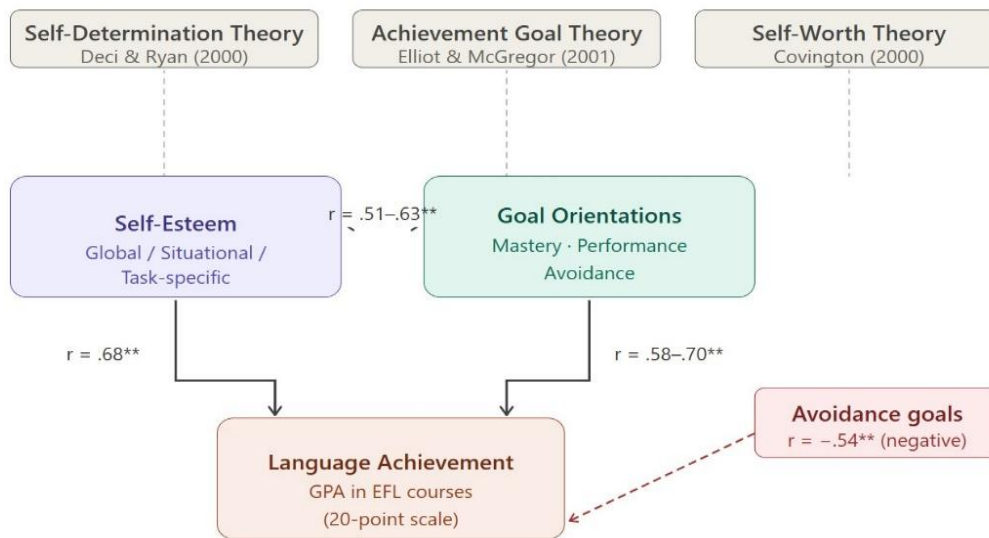


Figure 1. Conceptual framework: theoretical pathways among self-esteem, goal orientations, and language achievement.
 $^{**} p < .01$. Bidirectional arrow ($\leftrightarrow$) = mutually reinforcing relationship.

Figure 1. Conceptual framework: Theoretical pathways among self-esteem, goal orientations, and language achievement.

4. Methodology

4.1 Research Design

A quantitative correlational design was used. This design is used when naturally occurring relationships between individual difference variables are being measured, and the direction and strength of those relationships are of interest, but not the result of an experimental manipulation (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The choice of correlational design is supported by two arguments: First, because self-esteem and goal orientations are dispositional factors that might not be valid within laboratory settings, its use of a correlational method is justified. Second, because this study is intended to provide an empirical baseline for a population in which no research has previously been conducted, rather than to test a causal relationship, a correlational design is warranted. Throughout, ethical procedures were adhered to including written informed consent from all participants and anonymisation and password security of data files.

4.2 Participants

Table 1 presents the demographic profile of the 125 participants recruited via convenience sampling from language institutes in multiple Iraqi cities.

Table 1 Participant Demographic Characteristics (N = 125)

Characteristic	Category	(%) n
Gender	Male	67 (53.6%)
	Female	58 (46.4%)
Age range	20–35 years	M = 24.6, SD = 4.1
Native language	Arabic / Kurdish	125 (100%)
Institution type	Language institutes	Multiple Iraqi cities
Sampling method	Convenience sampling	Response rate: 88.7%

4.3 Instruments

Table 2 provides a structured overview of each instrument, and Table 3 details the AGOI subscales.

Table 2 Summary of Research Instruments

Instrument	Source	Items	Scale	α (present)
Self-Esteem Questionnaire (SEQ)	Sorensen (2005)	50	4-point Likert: 1 (Strongly disagree) – 4 (Strongly agree)	.65
Achievement Goal Orientation Inventory (AGOI)	Midgley et al. (1998)	18	5-point Likert: 1 (Not at all true) – 5 (Very true of me)	.71
Language Achievement (GPA)	Institute records	—	20-point scale; M = 17.05, SD = 1.39	—

Table 3 AGOI Subscales: Definitions and Sample Items

Subscale	Definition	Sample Item
Mastery	Pursuing learning and self-improvement for intrinsic reasons; evaluating competence against prior personal standards	"I like work best when it really makes me think"
Performance	Seeking to demonstrate superior ability relative to peers in evaluative contexts; outperforming others	"It is important to do better than other students"

Avoidance	Seeking to conceal incompetence from peers and teachers; avoiding appearing incapable in public	"I do my work mainly to avoid looking bad"
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4.4 Procedure and Data Analysis

The data was gathered remotely through WhatsApp during COVID-19 pandemic. A total of 141 sets of questionnaires were sent out, with 125 returned completely filled (88.7% return). Data on GPA were obtained from the institute records on the consent of the participants. A post hoc power analysis (GPower 3.1; Faul et al., 2009) showed that $N = 125$ was adequate to detect medium correlations ($r \geq .25$) at $\alpha = .05$. All variables passed the Kolmogorov-Smirnov Test of normality (all $p > .05$), thus meeting parametric assumptions. The significance of all three research hypotheses was tested using Pearson Product-Moment Correlation Coefficient. Effect sizes were interpreted according to Cohen (1988): $r = .10$ (small), $.30$ (medium), $.50$ (large). The analyses were performed in IBM SPSS Statistics Version 23.

5. Results

Tables 4 and 5 present descriptive statistics. Tables 6–8 present the Pearson correlational analyses corresponding to each research question.

Table 4 Descriptive Statistics: Achievement Goal Orientations ($N = 125$)

Goal Orientation	Min	Max	M (SD)	Skewness
Mastery	8.00	30.00	22.04 (4.57)	−0.31
Performance	11.00	30.00	22.40 (4.41)	−0.28
Avoidance	12.00	30.00	21.68 (3.39)	−0.19

Table 5

Descriptive Statistics: Self-Esteem and Language Achievement ($N = 125$)

Variable	Min	Max	M (SD)	Skewness
Self-Esteem (SEQ)	52.00	145.00	101.47 (22.58)	−0.14
Language Achievement (GPA)	13.00	19.80	17.05 (1.39)	−0.42

Goal scores are relatively grouped (21.68 – 22.40), which means having a well-balanced motivational profile. The mean self-esteem score was 101.47 which represents medium to high self-esteem on the global level, with a high variance ($SD = 22.58$) needed for correlational analysis. All variables met the Kolmogorov-Smirnov criteria for normality ($p > .05$) and the Cronbach's alpha criteria for acceptability (SEQ: $\alpha = .65$; AGOI $\alpha = .71$).

Table 6 Pearson Correlation Matrix: Self-Esteem and Achievement Goal Orientations (N = 125)

Variable	.1 Mastery	.2 Performance	.3 Avoidance	Self-Esteem	.4
1. Mastery goals	—				
2. Performance goals	.62**	—			
3. Avoidance goals	.21*	.14*	—		
4. Self-Esteem	.63**	.51**	-.42**	—	

Note. * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$. Cohen (1988) benchmarks: small $r = .10$, medium $r = .30$, large $r = .50$.

Table 7 Pearson Correlation: Self-Esteem and Language Achievement (N = 125)

Variable	Self-Esteem	.1	.2
1. Self-Esteem	—		
2. Language Achievement (GPA)	.68**	—	

Note. ** $p < .01$.

Table 8 Pearson Correlation Matrix: Goal Orientations and Language Achievement (N = 125)

Variable	.1 Mastery	.2 Performance	.3 Avoidance	Lang. Achievement	.4
1. Mastery goals	—				
2. Performance goals	.62**	—			
3. Avoidance goals	.21*	.14*	—		
4. Language Achievement	.70**	.58**	-.54**	—	

Note. ** $p < .01$.

6. Discussion

The findings coalesce into a theoretically coherent, and practically meaningful picture. Each finding is interpreted in light of the conceptual framework developed in Section 3 and discussed in a systematic manner with prior findings and points of convergence and divergence are identified.

6.1 Self-Esteem and Goal Orientations (RQ1)

The large positive correlations between self-esteem and mastery goals ($r = .63$) and self-esteem and performance goals ($r = .51$), as well as the medium-large negative correlation between self-esteem and avoidance goals ($r = -.42$) validate all three theories. Learners with a satisfied competence need are more likely to have higher self-esteem and more likely to adopt a mastery goal (both of which are results of the same underlying need-satisfaction substrate; Deci & Ryan, 2000). According to the self-worth theory, when learners have a secure sense of self-esteem, they do not have to enlist in avoidance as a defensive move (Covington, 2000) and are free to direct their attention towards approach goals.

These patterns are similar in different cultures. In an EFL class, Pishghadam et al. (2021) found the self-esteem–mastery correlation as .58 and the self-esteem–avoidance correlation as $-.39$ for the Arab EFL learners. Alivernini and Lucidi (2011) reported that mastery goals and self-esteem were a coherent motivational cluster, which they found to be a related predictor of achievement for Italian school students. The intercorrelation between mastery and performance was greater than that found in Western studies ($r = .40$, Elliot & McGregor, 2001), and higher than the meta-analytic mean ($r = .34$, Huang, 2011), probably because of the cultural integration of learning and performance values in the Iraqi educational context. In Iraqi EFL learners, task orientations and ego orientations are more likely to co-occur than in individualist cultures, where mastery orientations and performance orientations do not seem to conflict with each other but rather represent different aspects of a learner's investment in achievement goals; Duda and Nicholls (1992) found exactly this pattern in collectivist cultures.

6.2 Self-Esteem and Language Achievement (RQ2)

The correlation between self-esteem and language achievement is $r = .68$ and is statistically significant at $p < .01$ with a large effect, which is higher than the typical value of $r = .40-.50$ found in the EFL literature (Koosha et al., 2011) and the r value of $\approx .45$ reported in the Habrat's (2018) review of the literature. This higher value can be understood in the light of the theory: When the needs relevant to SDT (i.e., autonomy, competence, relatedness) are under-nourished systematically in the environment by controlling evaluative assessment and by providing restricted formative feedback, self-esteem serves as an important internal compensatory resource. Learners who have positive self-regard are able to maintain their own motivation even when the environment is not motivating; learners who have low self-regard will not have such reserve.

Narafshan and Noori (2018) revealed that the variance proportions of self-esteem were higher in high-evaluative-pressure EFL environments compared to low-pressure environments, which is the case of Iraqi language institutes. The above reported value is higher than the self-esteem–achievement correlation reported by Baumeister et al. (2003) in their large-scale review, which was around .20 when controlling for prior ability; its higher value is in line with the contextual amplification hypothesis that suggests self-esteem is more strongly linked to achievement in low-resource, high-pressure EFL settings than in educational contexts where weak self-esteem can be at least partially buffered by institutional support.

6.3 Goal Orientations and Language Achievement (RQ3)

The three goal orientations—achievement correlations all support the achievement goal theory predictions that mastery and performance goals are associated with higher achievement and avoidance goals are associated with lower achievement ($r = .70, .58$, and $-.54$, respectively). The correlation between mastery and achievement is higher than Pintrich's (2000) meta-analytic average of $.48$, and similar to the $.61$ reported by Zafarmand et al. (2014) for EFL learners in Iran, indicating that the relationship between mastery and achievement might be stronger in EFL settings where the learners are intrinsically motivated to learn English in the presence of environmental constraints.

The performance / achievement correlation ($r = .58$) fits in with the previous research by Harakiewicz et al. (2000) which indicated that performance goals relate to students' grades in competitive settings. The finding was qualified by Hulleman et al.'s (2010) meta-analysis which found that there were weaker connections between deep learning and performance goals than with mastery goals, and may have weaker effects on tasks involving long-term retention or creative application. The present GPA measure reflects evaluative performance – that is, exactly the domain in which performance goals are most motivating – and thus may overestimate the relationship between performance and achievement as compared to deeper comprehension measures.

One of the most practically important findings is the strong negative avoidance–achievement correlation ($r = -.54$). This is through self-worth theory, which states the basic incompatibility of identity protection and authentic learning. Huang's (2011) meta-analysis found the most consistent negative relationships between avoidance goals and achievement across all goal types. This negative effect is intensified in higher power distance (hpd) cultures, such as Iraq, as higher hpd cultures have more widespread avoidance motivation and its achievement is direr. Elliot et al. (2011) showed that this negative effect is amplified in higher power distance cultures, as the pressure to save face is stronger, leading to greater avoidance motivation and severer costs of success. The implication is that the correlation observed here could be a minimum estimate rather than an average estimate in the Iraqi context, as a result of this type of contextual amplification.

7. Pedagogical Implications

The results of the three research questions yield a unified and feasible recommendations for EFL practice in Iraq. These are structured around three intervention targets: development of mastery-oriented classroom climate, increased self-esteem of learners, and decreased avoidance motivation.

When it comes to classroom climate, Ames' (1992) TARGET framework provides a research-supported blueprint for developing mastery-based systems of teaching and learning. In the context of Iraqi EFL classroom, the principles of TARGET can be translated as follows: designing tasks that allow students to imagine that they can set up, and improve their own, that allow them to use their strategies to encounter genuine challenges and progress rather than to compare their performance with peers; giving feedback that takes into account strategic effort and progress in working but not right answers; grouping students together in cooperative groups for tasks that allow them to see others as cooperating partners rather than competitors, and evaluate using portfolios and growth indicators as well as summative examinations. This view is extended to the ELT context by Dörnyei (2001) who

suggests that it is important for teachers to make it clear that language learning is a gradual process that is error-tolerant, as this will neutralize the face-saving anxiety underlying avoidance motivation in the culture of the Iraqi educational situation.

In terms of self-esteem, the correlation between self-esteem and achievement was high ($r = .68$) indicating that learners with limited self-esteem are not only psychologically at a disadvantage but also academically at risk. There are three specific mechanisms which can solve that. Scaffolded success experiences are tasks which are designed to ensure early success with successful engagement and are increasingly more difficult and more worked out so that evidence of capability is self-referenced, thereby consolidating positive self-regard. In other words, developmental attribution feedback, which explicitly teaches students that success is due to some strategies that they can learn and to their effort, is the foundation for positive self-esteem (Dweck, 2000). Self-compassion instruction involves teaching learners a non-judgemental, growth-oriented response to errors (Neff, 2011; Thalab & Issa, 2026) which breaks the cycle of damage to self-esteem that leads to avoidance motivation.

In terms of avoidance motivation, the high correlation between avoidance and achievement ($r = -.54$) makes avoidance motivation the most critical motivational issue in EFL classrooms in Iraq. The AGOI is available as a diagnostic tool and can be given at the beginning of every course to identify students with an avoidance orientation. Once identified, these learners can be given specific interventions: incremental challenge structures, where the challenge is manageable, but the student may not experience failure in public; cooperative learning activities, where there is less social failure as an individual; and motivational consultations, where the student's self-costs of avoidance strategies are discussed, and approach alternatives provided.

8. Limitations and Future Research

The results of the present research would be limited to the methodological scope. There are four restrictions that need to be explicitly identified.

Convenience sampling of the language institutes in the Iraqi cities is the first factor that restricts the representativeness of the sample. Conclusions drawn from the findings may not be generalised to secondary school students and university EFL learners, who may have significantly different motivational levels, and also to the rural learners who may be found in different areas. Stratified probability sampling, stratified by institutions, regions, and proficiency, should be used for future research.

Second, because of the cross sectional correlational design, causal conclusions cannot be drawn. The present data does not allow for the establishment of the direction of the relationship between the constructs of self-esteem and goal orientations; the theoretical model states that the relationships are bidirectional. Longitudinal panel designs with at least three waves of measurement could be used to examine the temporal order of these associations, and would allow for the exploration of the hypothesized self-reinforcing developmental cycles suggested by SDT and self-worth theory.

Third, the language achievement was measured in terms of GPA instead of a standardised language test. Although GPA reflects performance on many tasks, it could combine language competence and motivational persistence, study behaviour and compliance, all of which are correlated with, but not included in, the affective constructs assessed in this study. Future research should also involve the use of standardized scores (e.g. IELTS or TOEFL) in addition to the use of GPAs to separate out the linguistic and motivational components of achievement.

Fourth, the measures for all constructs were self-report questionnaires, which could lead to common method variance and social desirability bias. Further studies are needed to triangulate quantitative questionnaire data with qualitative data (semi-structured interviews, think-aloud protocols, and teacher observations) to gain a deeper, multi-perspective understanding of the motivational dynamics captured in this study.

9. Conclusion

The interrelationships between self-esteem, achievement goal orientations, and language achievement were investigated using 125 Iraqi EFL learners in this study, which was based on a theoretical framework that combines achievement goal theory, self-determination theory, and self-worth theory. The data is internally consistent and theoretically coherent: self-esteem is positively correlated with mastery and performance goals and negatively with avoidance goals; self-esteem is a strong positive predictor of language achievement and avoidance orientation a strong negative predictor to language achievement. The high effect sizes compared with similar studies conducted in Western settings suggest a motivational amplification in Iraq due to its high pressure and limited resource EFL environment.

The findings in the present study set an empirical foundation for the Iraqi context of the EFL motivation field and presented three high leverage intervention targets for EFL reform at the classroom, curriculum and policy levels: (1) design the EFL classroom environment with a mastery-oriented approach, (2) scaffold self-esteem, and (3) reduce avoidance motivation. The conceptual framework presented here also offers a replicable model for integrated motivational investigation in similar post-conflict and/or resource-limited educational contexts where motivational factors may play an important role in the achievement of learners.

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