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A Systematic Review of Empirical Studies on Young EFL Learners' Motivation and Task Engagement

Mai Sri Lena[1,2] and Marianne Nikolov[3]

Abstract

This article overviews empirical studies on young English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners' motivation and task engagement published between 2004 and 2024 to identify trends and gaps in these areas. We analyzed 28 studies conducted in public and private elementary schools in twelve countries, focusing on (1) the theories and frameworks the studies relied on, (2) the research designs used and their focuses, (3) the tasks children engaged with, and (4) the main findings. We followed the seven-stage approach recommended by Chong and Plonsky (2024): (1) defining focus and aim; (2) formulating search strategy; (3) selecting relevant studies; (4) coding studies; (5) checking coding reliability; (6) analyzing data; and (7) reporting and visualizing findings. Searches were conducted in ScienceDirect and Web of Science databases. Articles were screened based on titles, abstracts, and full texts according to the inclusion criteria. Our analysis revealed that not all studies used theoretical frameworks appropriate for young learners. Quantitative research design was used in 13 studies, ten used mixed methods and five qualitative designs. Eighteen studies focused on motivation, four on engagement, and another four on both. In five studies, children worked on technology-enhanced tasks, while in another four, they participated in collaborative writing tasks, and in others, they worked on tasks aimed at skill development. Technology-based, playful, interactive, and collaborative tasks were found to enhance young learners' motivation and engagement. In the last section, limitations are pinpointed, and the way forward is outlined.

Plain Language Summary

A Systematic Review of Research on Young EFL Learners' Motivation and Task Engagement

This paper reviewed empirical studies on young English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners' motivation and task engagement published from 2004 to 2024 to find out trends and gaps in these areas. We analyzed 28 studies conducted in public and private elementary schools in twelve countries, focusing on (1) the theories and frameworks the studies relied on, (2) the research designs used and their focuses, (3) the tasks children engaged with, and (4) the main findings. The procedures are as follows: (1) defining focus and aim; (2) formulating search strategy; (3) selecting relevant studies; (4) coding studies; (5) checking coding reliability; (6) analyzing data; and (7) reporting and visualizing findings. We used two databases to search articles, namely ScienceDirect and Web of Science. Articles were screened based on titles, abstracts, and full texts according to the inclusion criteria. The results of this study revealed that not all studies utilized theoretical frameworks appropriate for young learners. Quantitative research design was most often used (n = 13)

[1]Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Doctoral School of Education, University of Szeged, Csongrád, Hungary
[2]Departement of Elementary School Teacher Education, Universitas Negeri Padang, West Sumatra, Indonesia
[3]Institute of English Studies, University of Pécs, Hungary

Corresponding Author:
Mai Sri Lena, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Doctoral School of Education, University of Szeged, Szeged, Csongrád, Dugonics tér H-6720, Hungary.
Emails: maisrilena@fip.unp.ac.id; mai.sri.lena@edu.u-szeged.hu

Data Availability Statement included at the end of the article

among mixed methods (n = 10) and qualitative designs (n = 5). Eighteen studies focused on motivation, four on engagement, and another four on both. In five studies, children worked on technology-enhanced tasks, while in another four, they participated in collaborative writing tasks, and in others, they worked on tasks aimed at skill development. Technology-based, playful, interactive, and collaborative tasks were found to enhance young learners' motivation and engagement. In the last section, we describe the limitations of our study and outline further directions.

Keywords
motivation, task engagement, young learners, EFL, collaboration tasks, interactive task

Introduction

This systematic review (SR) aims to contribute to the research of children's additional language learning motivation and task engagement. It examines how these constructs have been conceptualized and researched with young learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) over the past 20 years. By analyzing empirical research conducted in various international settings, the review highlights how different frameworks such as self-determination theory (SDT; Ryan & Deci, 2020) and L2 motivational self-system (L2MSS; Dörnyei, 2019) have been used.

The SR analyzed empirical studies published between 2004 and 2024 to identify their theoretical frameworks, research designs, task types, and to critically review their main findings. We aimed to synthetize existing knowledge, to reveal research gaps, and guide future investigations and pedagogical approaches that can enhance the effectiveness of EFL instruction for young learners.

Aligned with the purpose of conducting the SR, young learners (YLs) are defined as children in primary (ISCED 1) and lower secondary schools (ISCED 2; UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2012) typically ranging in age from 6 to 12/14 years, depending on the school system (Mihaljević Djigunović & Nikolov, 2019).

Many definitions exist for learning in general, and language learning in particular. "Motivation concerns the direction and magnitude of human behavior, that is: the choice of a particular action, the persistence with it, and the effort expended on it" (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011, p. 4). It is also defined as the willingness, interest, and enthusiasm to engage in learning tasks (Roothooft et al., 2022). Task engagement concerns learners' active involvement, motivation, investment, attention, effort, and interest in the learning process and task completion (Zare & Derakhshan, 2024).

Over the past decades, there has been exponential growth in the number of children enrolled in early EFL programs (Johnstone, 2019). Curricular innovations have been introduced, and new themes have emerged in research on these programs. One of them focuses on content- and task-based language teaching methodologies adapted to YLs' needs, while another examines the role of motivation in early EFL learning, reflecting recent shifts in motivation research (Lamb et al., 2019). Decades of innovative global discussions on conceptualizing language learning motivation have recently come full circle from Dörnyei's (1994) seminal ideas emphasizing the role of contextual variables, to previous L2 learning experiences (Dörnyei, 2019) and his recent assertion that the basic unit of motivational research is the task (Dörnyei, 2020). A related construct, engagement, proposed by Philp and Duchesne (2016), was defined by Mercer (2022) in the context of language classrooms as follows (p. 39):

> the learner's volitional active involvement in the learning task. This comprises involvement on an emotional, cognitive, and behavioral level situated within a nested system of multiple social contexts. The defining characteristic of engagement is that learners are actively involved in their learning, not just complying or conforming to social expectations, but volitionally engaged in authentic, meaningful learning.

This focal shift aligns with Ushioda's (2016) call to explore motivation through a small-lens approach, focusing on task motivation (Kormos & Wilby, 2019) and engagement (Hiver et al., 2024). These approaches are highly relevant to how children learn languages (Murphy, 2014; Pinter, 2011). Widely accepted definitions of language learning tasks apply to YLs, as their primary focus is on meaning (Ellis, 2009) and tasks have a "communicative purpose and a non-linguistic outcome" (Bryfonski et al., 2024, p. 2).

Although motivation is the most frequently researched individual difference variable in task-based studies (Bryfonski et al., 2024), relatively few inquiries focus on YLs compared with older language learners (Lamb, 2017). Students' motivation to learn English is influenced by individual differences such as gender, age, achievement, grade (Hu & McGeown, 2020; Inostroza et al., 2024; Oga-Baldwin & Nakata, 2017) and their teachers'

teaching practices (Hennebry-Leung & Xiao, 2023). Teacher profile is a key factor shaping motivation and attitudes toward learning English, particularly teachers' access to multisensory and audiovisual materials (Inostroza et al., 2024). Teacher warmth and strictness, homeroom teacher involvement, appropriate pacing, instructional clarity, and a balanced variety of activities also enhance YLs' engagement (Oga-Baldwin & Nakata, 2020).

Children's motivation is considered "a specific phenomenon in itself due to its sources and dimensions, and its research requires age-appropriate approaches" (Mihaljević Djigunović & Nikolov, 2019, p. 516). YLs' motivation in the language classroom is shaped by how intrinsically motivating and cognitively challenging the tasks are, as well as the feedback they receive from their teacher and peers (Nikolov, 1999). Nonetheless, little research has been conducted on how YLs engage with tasks when learning English and the list of tasks is limited. Thus, we agree that "we must make understanding engagement in language learning contexts a priority" (Mercer, 2019, p. 15) to identify what types of tasks (Nikolov, 2016) YLs engage in and how they do so while acquiring a new language.

This research aims to review recent studies on young language learners' motivation and task engagement. First, we outline the significance of motivation and engagement in early foreign language (FL) programs, define and contextualize constructs, and explain their significance. Then, we describe the process of selecting empirical studies and analyze them along five research questions.

Methodology

In this section, we describe the process of conducting this SR review following the steps recommended by Chong and Plonsky (2024). First, we defined the focus and objectives to evaluate the quality and scope of studies and to inform new research questions (Macaro et al., 2018). Then, we developed our search strategy to identify the relevant literature based on inclusion/exclusion criteria. The selected publications were then coded by the two authors to ensure reliability and consistency in interpretation. Data from the selected studies were analyzed through thematic analysis to identify key themes, while descriptive statistics, such as frequencies and percentages, were used to identify patterns and trends. Finally, the results are presented in a structured format typical of research papers for clarity and depth.

Research Questions

We aimed to answer five research questions:

1. What theories and frameworks were used for studying YLs' motivation and engagement?
2. What research designs did the researchers apply, and what aspects did they focus on?
3. What data collection instruments were used?
4. What types of tasks did the children engage in?
5. What are the key findings on YLs' motivation and task engagement?

The Search Strategy

ScienceDirect and Web of Science (WoS) were searched to identify relevant publications, as they encompass high-quality, peer-reviewed journals in education and applied linguistics. The articles were selected from *Q*-ranked journals and low-impact journals. The search keywords included the following: English, English as a foreign language, EFL, English as a second language, ESL, elementary school, primary school, motivation, engagement, task, young learners, YLs. We employed Boolean operators (AND, OR) to combine these keywords such as ("EFL" OR "English as a Foreign Language") AND ("motivation" OR "student motivation") AND ("task engagement" OR "learning engagement") AND ("young learners" OR "children").

Selection Criteria

The process of selection is presented in Figure 1. The inclusion criteria were as follows: (1) English (EFL or ESL) as the target language, (2) published in English between 2004 and 2024, (3) empirical studies on children's motivation and engagement in and outside of class in public and private education, (4) published in refereed journals, and (5) participants were children aged between 6 and 14, with or without their teachers and parents.

The exclusion criteria were as follows: homeschooling, unpublished texts, theses, papers from unclear sources, non-English publications, overviews, book chapters not based on empirical studies, book reviews, and papers on upper secondary schools, high schools, and universities.

Coding Studies and Checking Reliability

First, we identified 204 publications by searching the databases according to the criteria outlined in Figure 1. Next, we reviewed the titles and abstracts and listed their characteristics to guarantee the reliability of data charting. We coded them along these lines: their author(s), year of publication, country, age and number of participants, theories and frameworks, research design and focus, data collection instruments, tasks YLs engaged in, and the main findings. Coding was an iterative process, going back and forth until the two authors agreed on the codes.

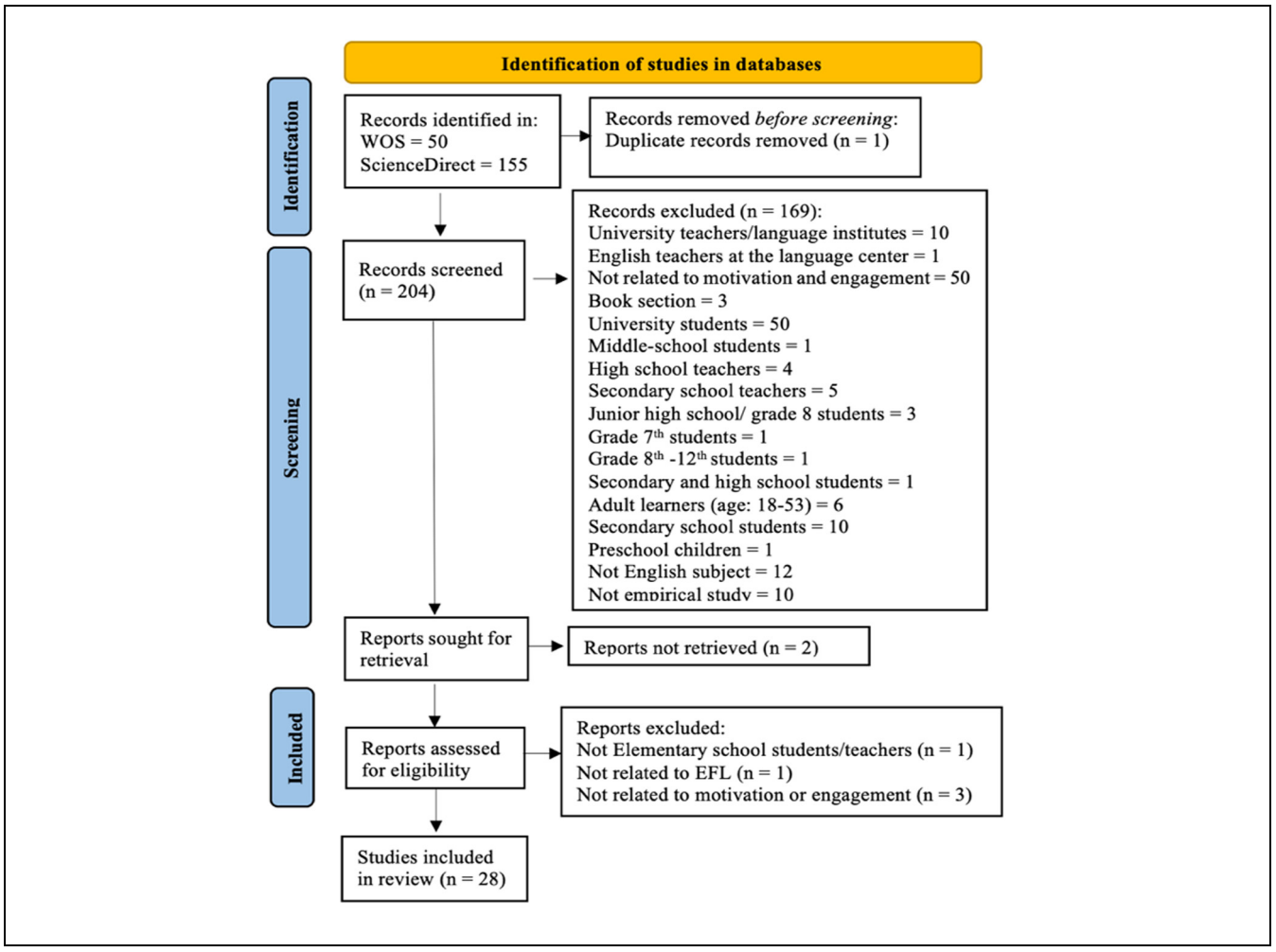

Figure 1. PRISMA flow diagram.
Source. Adapted from Page et al. (2021).

Analyzing Data. The 28 articles that met our selection criteria were analyzed using thematic analysis corresponding to the research questions.

Reporting and Visualizing Findings. The results of the analysis were presented along with the research questions in narrative texts and tables.

Results

Search Outcomes

The search activity was conducted in January 2024, and the keyword searches resulted in 205 papers. After eliminating one duplicate, 204 abstracts were assessed using the inclusion and exclusion criteria. Of these, 169 articles were removed, leaving 35 full texts to review. Two texts were unavailable; thus, 33 papers were read, five of which were excluded, as they failed to meet the inclusion criteria. Finally, 28 papers were selected.

Characteristics of the 28 Studies

The 28 studies were conducted in Taiwan ($n = 10$), Spain ($n = 6$), Japan, Korea ($n = 2$), China, Colombia, Portugal, Israel, Indonesia, the Republic of Tatarstan, Hong Kong, and Iran ($n = 1$). In the database, 18 studies focused on motivation, four on engagement (Coyle & Roca de Larios, 2020; Liu et al., 2017; Naderi & Moafian, 2023; Rosário et al., 2016), four on both motivation and engagement (Azkarai & Kopinska, 2020; Huang, 2011; Liu et al., 2016; Oga-Baldwin et al., 2017), and two on tasks (García Mayo & Ainara Imaz, 2019; García Mayo & Lázaro Ibarrola, 2015).

A total of 4,914 participants were involved, including 4,743 learners, 161 parents, and 10 EFL teachers. Only

two studies involved teacher participants (Kang, 2017; Kim et al., 2018). The ages of the students ranged from 6 to 14 years, while the ages of the pre-service and in-service teachers ranged from 20 to 35 years. Table 1 summarizes the characteristics of the 28 studies.

RQ1: Theories and Frameworks Used in the Studies

Table 2 presents the theoretical frameworks and their authors in the 28 studies in three categories. The categories were established based on their relevance for researching young learners' development. They were also evaluated to see if they were adapted for young learners (YLs) or deemed not relevant for this age group, as they primarily considered adult learners. Self-determination theory is the most often used one.

RQ2: Research Design and Focus

In this section, we present what research design and focus were used in the selected studies. The most frequent research design in the database was quantitative ($n = 13$), followed by mixed methods ($n = 10$) and qualitative design ($n = 5$). Eleven studies were longitudinal, lasting between 6 weeks to 2 years. Seventeen publications included cross-sectional research.

Focuses in Quantitative Studies

Out of the 13 publications using quantitative research design, five examined the relationships between technology-enhanced learning, motivation, and engagement. Vidergor (2021) investigated the effects of digital escape room games on YLs' motivation and collaboration in a quasi-experiment. Andreani and Ying (2019) examined the impact of interactive games on children's interest and motivation in an experimental study. Another experimental inquiry (Liu et al., 2017) used a remix-oriented approach (aimed at generating online artifacts, endless hybridization, and scaffolding) to promote student engagement and motivation. Liu et al. (2016) analyzed participants' motivation and engagement patterns using Web 2.0 digital storytelling activities, whereas Lan et al. (2015) explored the effects of computer-supported cooperative learning on YLs' writing performance and motivation.

Furthermore, five projects explored the relationships between pedagogy and performance. One of them examined how model texts influenced the quality of YLs' drafts and their task motivation when writing picture descriptions (Villarreal & Lázaro-Ibarrola, 2022). Two longitudinal study examined the effects of model texts on EFL students' writing (Luquin & García Mayo, 2024) and on reading motivation and reading performance (Kanonire et al., 2022). Liao et al. (2018) implemented a quasi-experiment to investigate the effect of creative pedagogy on YLs' creativity, motivation, and learning performance in an EFL classroom. Finally, Tanaka and Kutsuki (2018) analyzed children's motivation to learn English at an international school in Japan that implemented bilingual content-based instruction.

Three studies explored factors affecting children's English learning, focusing on personal and environmental influences. The first one was a longitudinal study by Oga-Baldwin et al. (2017). They examined YLs' perceptions of the learning environment, motivation, and engagement. Next, Guo et al. (2023) investigated the relationship between learners' motivation, grit, self-regulated learning strategies, and their impact on English achievements. Finally, He et al. (2014) assessed the relationship between parents' literacy involvement and their children's personal goals, maladaptive behaviors, and English achievements.

Focal Points in Studies Using Mixed Methods

The ten studies using mixed methods were grouped into four categories: four of them focused on instructional approaches and strategies. First, Huang (2011) investigated the impact of content-based language instruction on students' motivated behaviors, attention, engagement, volunteering, and classroom verbal interaction by combining qualitative and quantitative data. Then, García Mayo and Lázaro Ibarrola's (2015) observational study examined negotiation strategies utilized by children in EFL and CLIL programs in two educational settings. They also quantified the observational data of learner negotiation of meaning and strategies using percentages and conducting a two-sample binomial test. Another observational study (Rosário et al., 2016) was conducted on promoting behavioral engagement and enhancing self-regulated learning strategies through a culturally relevant narrative-based intervention with Roma children. The researchers quantified the observation data by calculating means of the scores of each variable and conducted multivariate analyses to examine effects of the intervention on behavioral and cognitive engagement. Naderi and Moafian (2023) conducted a quasi-experiment on the impact of digital and non-digital play-based instruction on children's vocabulary learning and retention. They used multiple instruments of data gathering, namely tests, interview, and observation.

Three publications addressed technology-enhanced learning and used multiple instruments of data collection: tests, surveys, and interviews. Sally Wu and Alan Hung (2022) examined the effects of virtual reality on speaking performance. Their dataset included pre-test (mid-test score), post-speaking test scores, pre- and post-

Table 1. Summary of Data from the 28 Studies.

Authors	Year	Country	Research design	Instruments	Focus	Age of YLs	No. of YLs/ teachers/parents
Luquin and García Mayo	2024	Spain	Quantitative experimental longitudinal	Writing test	Effects of model texts on EFL children's written production	11–12	76/0/0
Naderi and Moafian	2023	Iran	Mixed quasi-experimental cross-sectional	Test of vocabulary, oral placement test, interview, observation	Digital and non-digital play-based instruction, children's vocabulary learning and retention	6–11	40/0/0
Liao et al.	2023	Taiwan	Mixed comparative cross-sectional	Attention, confidence, satisfaction questionnaire, interview, vocabulary test	Augmented-reality, game-based learning, English performance and motivation	9–10	50/0/0
Guo et al.	2023	Hong Kong	Quantitative comparative study cross-sectional	Questionnaire on motivation and grit, English test of vocabulary, reading, writing, listening	Motivation, grit, and self-regulated learning, strategy use and English learning achievement	10–12	723/0/0
Sally Wu and Alan Hung	2022	Taiwan	Mixed cross-sectional	Questionnaire on YLs' affective variables, interview, speaking test and General English Proficiency Test	Virtual reality, English-speaking performance, willingness to communicate, and learning autonomy	11–13	56/0/0
Kanonire et al.	2022	Tatarstan	Quantitative longitudinal	Reading comprehension test	Reading motivation and reading performance	6–10	979/0/0
Villarreal and Lázaro-Ibarrola	2022	Spain	Quantitative experimental cross-sectional	Writing test	Model texts, writing quality and task motivation to describe pictures	10–11	26/0/0
Tseng	2021	Taiwan	Qualitative case study cross-sectional	Questionnaire of L2 motivational self-systems and intended effort, interview, observation	EFL learning motivation in rural settings; bridging socioeconomic divide between rural and urban contexts	11	5/0/0
Vidergor	2021	Israel	Quantitative cross-sectional	Scales of playful experience, collaboration, gaming motivation	Digital escape room game, motivation and collaboration	7–9 and 10–12	528/0/0
Azkarai and Kopinska	2020	Spain	Mixed exploratory cross-sectional	Questionnaire of motivation level, writing test, observation	Patterns of interaction, engagement in language-related episodes (LREs), and task motivation	11–12	62/0/0
Tsai	2020	Taiwan	Mixed quasi-experiment cross-sectional	Instructional material motivation questionnaire, interview, vocabulary test	Traditional lecturing method and AR method in teaching English vocabulary, students' motivation and performance	11–12	42/0/0
Coyle and Roca de Larios	2020	Spain	Qualitative exploratory cross-sectional	Writing test of narrative picture story, observation	YLs' engagement with models using written corrective technique in EFL and CLIL settings	9–11	16/0/0
García Mayo and Imaz Agirre	2019	Spain	Mixed cross-sectional	Key English Test, observation	Task modality and pair formation method, interactional patterns and LREs	8–9 and 10–11	62/0/0
Andreani and Ying	2019	Indonesia	Quantitative experimental design cross-sectional	Questionnaire on perception of game users	Interactive games, PowPow, as an alternative approach	6–12	115/0/0

(continued)

Table 1. (continued)

Authors	Year	Country	Research design	Instruments	Focus	Age of YLs	No. of YLs/ teachers/parents
Tanaka and Kutsuki	2018	Japan	Quantitative cross-sectional	Questionnaire on motivational orientations	Motivation for L2 learning	7–12	112/0/0
Kim et al.	2018	Korea	Qualitative cross-sectional	Interview	Demotivators and resilience in EFL learning	NA	23/9/0
Liao et al.	2018	Taiwan	Experimental design quasi-experiment longitudinal	Vocabulary test	Creativity pedagogy, learning performance, and motivation	6–7	256/0/0
Oga-Baldwin et al.	2017	Japan	Quantitative longitudinal	Vocabulary test, teacher assessment, self-regulation questionnaire, observation	Motivation, perceptions of learning environment and engagement	10–11	515/0/0
Kang	2017	Korea	Qualitative longitudinal	Interview, observation	Language play	11–12 and 30	28/1/0
Liu et al.	2017	Taiwan	Quantitative experimental design longitudinal	Flow survey, motivated strategies for learning questionnaire, storytelling project	Remix-oriented approach and student engagement	9–10	45/0/0
Liu et al.	2016	Taiwan	Quantitative longitudinal	Flow survey, motivated strategies for learning questionnaire, English vocabulary and oral test	Students' motivation and engagement patterns and Web 2.0 digital storytelling activities	9–10	24/0/0
Rosário et al.	2016	Portugal	Mixed methods experimental design longitudinal	Observation	Behavioral and cognitive engagement and culturally relevant narrative-based intervention	10–12	35/0/0
Lan et al.	2015	Taiwan	Quantitative quasi-experiment longitudinal	Grammaticality Judgment Test and an English Composition Test	Integrating computer-supported cooperative learning and prewriting strategies to improve writing performance and motivation	10–11	81/0/0
García Mayo and Lázaro Ibarrola	2015	Spain	Mixed observational research cross-sectional	Observation	Negotiation strategies in EFL and content and language integrated learning	8–11	80/0/0
Butler	2015	China	Mixed cross-sectional	Questionnaire on motivation, interview, Cambridge ESOL tests	Parents' socio-economic status, behaviors, beliefs, and children's motivation	9–14	572/0/0
Aguirre Sánchez	2014	Colombia	Qualitative case study longitudinal	Observation	Teachers' perspectives and beliefs about motivation, autonomy, and emotional support	20–35	6/0/0
He et al.	2014	Taiwan	Quantitative cross-sectional	Questionnaire of patterns of adaptive learning scale and the avoidant help seeking scale	Parents' literacy involvement and students' personal goals, maladaptive behaviors, and achievement	11	161/0/161
Huang	2011	Taiwan	Mixed methods, longitudinal	Observation	Content-based language instruction, motivated behaviors, and classroom verbal interaction	6–7	25/0/0

Table 2. Theoretical Frameworks in the 28 Studies.

Categories	Theories	Authors
Relevant for researching YLs	Extrinsic motivation	Naderi and Moafian
	Self-determination theory (SDT)	Butler; Kanonire et al; Oga-Baldwin et al.; Tanaka and Kutsuki
	L2 motivational self-system	Tseng
	Engagement theory	Sally Wu and Alan Hung; Oga-Baldwin et al.
	Social cognitive theory and SDT	Guo et al.
	Social constructivism	Villarreal and Lázaro-Ibarrola
	Socio-educational model	Butler
	Task motivation and level of engagement	Azkarai and Kopinska
Adapted for YLs	Motivation theories	Villarreal and Lázaro-Ibarrola
	Intention, relevance, confidence, and satisfaction model of motivation	Liao et al.
Not relevant for YLs	Instructional materials motivation	Tsai
	Expectancy-value theory	Guo et al.
	Gameful experience theory	Vidergor

questionnaires of willingness to communicate and learner autonomy, and transcription of semi-structured interviews. Tsai (2020) compared traditional lecturing and augmented reality as methods to enhance motivation and performance in teaching vocabulary in a quasi-experiment. The author collected quantitative data through pre-and post-tests and a survey and used a structured interview as a qualitative tool. Liao et al. (2023) examined how an augmented reality game-based learning application impacted learners' performance and motivation. Their data collection method was the same as Tsai's, but they used a semi-structured interview.

Three studies explored collaborative learning and interaction. Azkarai and Kopinska (2020) conducted an exploratory cross-sectional study examining interaction patterns, engagement in language-related episodes (LREs), and task motivation in writing. They analyzed motivation scores, writing scores, and observational data on patterns of interaction. García Mayo and Ainara Imaz (2019) investigated how task modality and pair formation affected interactional patterns and LREs as children collaborated in a cross-sectional study. Their dataset included test scores of English and observational data. Finally, Butler's (2015) cross-sectional study investigated the influence of parents' socioeconomic status (SES) and behavior on their children's motivation: quantitative data included survey results and test scores, whereas qualitative data were transcripts of interviews.

Focal Points in Qualitative Studies

Five studies used qualitative research design. Two of them examined the interaction between social aspects and YLs' motivation and engagement: Tseng (2021) conducted a case study on demotivators and resilience in EFL learning, whereas Kim et al. (2018) examined the impact of EFL learning resilience. Coyle and Roca de Larios (2020) explored classroom practices and techniques to enhance engagement through model texts and written corrective feedback techniques in EFL and CLIL contexts. Furthermore, Kang (2017) investigated the processes of spontaneous and creative use of language play, playful verbal humor, in an EFL class. Finally, a case study by Aguirre Sánchez (2014) explored elementary school teachers' beliefs about motivation, autonomy, and emotional support in their EFL classes.

RQ3: Data Collection Instruments

Half of the studies ($n = 14$) collected data through paper-based questionnaires on, for example, relevance, confidence, satisfaction, children's L2 motivational self-systems and intended effort. The instruments included a gaming motivation scale, surveys of flow and motivated strategies for learning, and self-regulation. Eight publications used interviews for data collection.

Sixteen studies used some kinds of tests. For example, four projects assessed children's vocabulary (Y. H. Liao et al., 2018; Naderi & Moafian, 2023; Oga-Baldwin et al., 2017; Tsai, 2020). Other studies used an oral placement test (Naderi & Moafian, 2023), a speaking test and a General English Proficiency Test (Sally Wu & Alan Hung, 2022), and a reading comprehension test (Kanonire et al., 2022). Observations were used in 11 papers (Table 1).

RQ4: Types of Tasks Children Engaged In

We grouped the task types by their most important characteristics (Table 3) into three categories: (1) tasks aimed at skill development, (2) collaborative tasks, and (3) technology-enhanced tasks. Vocabulary tasks were used in nine studies, whereas listening and spelling tasks were

Table 3. Four Categories of Task Types.

Task categories	Task types	*n*	Authors
Tasks targeting skill development	Vocabulary	9	Andreani and Ying; Guo et al.; Huang; Liao et al.; Naderi and Moafian; Oga-Baldwin et al.; Sally Wu and Alan Hung; Tsai; Tseng
	Writing	7	Azkarai and Kopinska; Coyle and Roca de Larios; García Mayo and Imaz Agirre; Guo et al.; Lan et al.; Luquin and García Mayo; Villarreal and Lázaro-Ibarrola
	Reading	6	Guo et al.; He et al.; Kanonire et al.; Liu et al.; Naderi and Moafian; Tseng
	Oral communication	5	García Mayo and Imaz Agirre; He et al.; Liao et al.; Liu et al.; Oga-Baldwin et al.
	Grammar	3	Azkarai and Kopinska; Guo et al.; Kim et al.
	Listening	1	Liao et al.
	Spelling	1	Naderi and Moafian
Collaborative tasks	Collaborative writing task	3	Luquin and García Mayo; Lan et al.; Villarreal and Lázaro-Ibarrola
	Storytelling	1	Liu et al.
Technology enhanced tasks	Digital applications	2	Liu et al.; Naderi and Moafian
	AR application	2	Liao et al.; Tsai
	VR software	1	Sally Wu and Alan Hung

only used in a single paper. Collaborative writing tasks were analyzed in three studies, and authors of five papers used technology-enhanced tasks.

RQ5: Key Findings

To address the fifth research question, we present the most important findings in five categories that emerged from the dataset. They include: (1) instructional approaches, (2) technology, (3) collaborative learning, (4) parental engagement and socioeconomic factors, and (5) teachers' beliefs. The results are discussed in the next sections.

Instructional Approaches

Twelve studies found that some instructional approaches fostered children's motivation and engagement. Huang (2011) reported that content-focused tasks increased learners' motivated behavior. They volunteered more eagerly in the content-based sessions than in the language-focused sessions, and they were more willing to answer questions, assist with setting up activities, and demonstrate tasks. Furthermore, Coyle and Roca de Larios (2020) observed that children in EFL and CLIL settings engaged in model texts differently. While both groups used written corrective feedback during a multi-stage writing task—including initial drafting, comparison with model texts, and revision—only the CLIL students incorporated new and alternative features from the feedback. Similarly, Luquin and García Mayo (2024) confirmed that model texts improved YLs' written production. A culturally relevant narrative-based intervention significantly optimized behavioral and cognitive engagement, particularly in the self-regulated learning strategies of Roma students (Rosário et al., 2016). The narrative approach also enhanced their school involvement and motivation while reinforcing the cultural value of storytelling in Roma communities. Self-determined orientations were the highest motivation for studying English, and English L1 students were more enthusiastic than Japanese L1 students about studying English in bilingual content-based instruction (Tanaka & Kutsuki, 2018). Teachers supported students and organized their language lessons well by making them more engaged and motivated (Oga-Baldwin et al., 2017). Kanonire et al. (2022) found that both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation were significant predictors of reading performance in third grade after controlling for reading ability in first grade. A special creativity technique pedagogy significantly improved not only learners' English performance, but also their creativity and motivation (Y. H. Liao et al., 2018).

As for the role of play, Naderi and Moafian (2023) observed that non-digital play-based instruction was more effective than IT-based methods in enhancing children's vocabulary learning and retention. Furthermore, Liu et al. (2017) revealed that their remix-oriented approach involved building multimedia stories on the Internet. Remixing model stories and personal ideas and online teaching assistance fostered high intrinsic motivation, sustained flow, and increased creative self-efficacy compared with learning through structured model stories and guided retelling activities. Kang (2017) explored how a teacher and their students engaged in playful humor construction, which served as an optimal L2 learning condition by keeping students engaged and alert, enhancing their memory retention, increasing interest and attention, improving learning outcomes through enjoyable activities, and positively influencing power relations

and task engagement. Finally, García Mayo and Lázaro Ibarrola (2015) found that age played a significant role in YLs' motivation: third-grade pupils displayed high motivation, enjoyed vocabulary tasks, and actively participated in tasks, whereas fifth graders felt embarrassed when speaking English and being recorded in front of their peers.

Technology

Technology-enhanced learning boosted children's motivation and engagement with tasks. For instance, virtual reality significantly enhanced children's grammar and lexical use in speaking, willingness to communicate, and learner autonomy, all of which were helpful in learning English (Sally Wu & Alan Hung, 2022). In Tsai's (2020) study, the experimental group achieved significantly higher test scores and motivational levels than the control group. YLs preferred using augmented reality to learn English vocabulary over traditional methods, as they found it exciting, interesting, and effective.

Additionally, Liao et al. (2023) revealed that children in rural areas improved significantly more in their English performance and motivation than their peers in urban areas using the StemUP application. Gamification in the app created a stimulating and entertaining learning environment for YLs and made language learning more engaging and less boring. In Liu et al.'s (2016) project, learners' low motivation levels increased as they progressed in publishing their stories on an online platform. The first cycle showed higher engagement levels due to the novelty effect of technology. In later stages, as the long-term effects of technology set in, children demonstrated high levels of engagement, and their intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, task value, self-efficacy, and peer learning increased significantly.

Vidergor (2021) found that a digital escape room game, encompassing a theme, a story, riddles, breakout boxes, and hidden codes, challenged children to solve a problem or a mystery within a time limit. The game increased participants' motivation, collaboration, and offered a meaningful social experience in a game-like learning experience and a sense of completion. Andreani and Ying's (2019) study also revealed that digital game-based learning effectively increased YLs' interest and motivation to learn English vocabulary.

Collaborative Learning

Four studies documented how collaboration and interaction enhanced children's motivation and engagement in writing tasks. In Lan et al.'s (2015) inquiry, computer-supported cooperative learning activities on a writing platform developed by the authors, and engagement with various prewriting techniques positively influenced children's level of motivation and contributed to enhanced task performance and writing quality. Villarreal and Lázaro-Ibarrola (2022) revealed moderate improvements in syntactic complexity and fluency for the group using model texts; however, they found a significant decline in post-test task motivation. Moreover, Azkarai and Kopinska (2020) identified four recurrent patterns of interaction among children working on writing tasks: collaborative, cooperative, facilitative/cooperative, and dominant/passive. García Mayo and Ainara Imaz (2019) observed that children were motivated to collaborate in both oral and oral plus written tasks, with more LREs in the latter. Interaction patterns and outcomes in the LREs varied depending on task modality and group formation method.

Parental Engagement and SES

Two publications offered insights into how parents impacted children's behavior. Butler (2015) examined how parents' engagement and socioeconomic background influenced YLs' motivation. Parents with higher SES were more likely to adjust their behaviors according to their children's changing needs and provided more opportunities for English language use outside of school. In contrast, parents with lower SES were more controlling and less effective in fostering their children's self-perceived competence, indicated by YLs' self-report about their ability in English and motivation.

He et al. (2014) revealed that parents' literacy engagement was significantly correlated with children's mastery and performance goals. YLs' mastery goals concerned the purpose for classroom learning, that is to acquire content knowledge, whereas their performance goals aimed at outperforming their peers on exams. When parents were actively engaged in literacy activities, they created an environment where children felt supported in their learning process. Parental support also promoted a sense of healthy competition among learners. Therefore, parental engagement significantly shaped YLs' motivation to learn English by boosting their confidence and proficiency, which led to academic success.

Teacher Beliefs

Finally, a single study explored the relationships between teachers' perspectives and beliefs in promoting motivation and autonomy. According to Aguirre Sánchez's (2014) findings, pre-service teachers believed that motivation and identification of YLs' academic needs played key roles. Their responsibilities included preparing lessons and analyzing YLs' characteristics and feelings toward both the teacher and the teaching materials. They

recognized the significance of addressing children's emotional and academic needs in their teaching.

Discussion

The first research question focused on how the authors of the 28 studies framed their papers. Only three studies used theories related to engagement specifically framed for YLs (Kopinska & Azkarai, 2020; Oga-Baldwin et al., 2017; Sally Wu & Alan Hung, 2022). Most authors relied on motivation theories relevant to children's needs, such as extrinsic motivation (Naderi & Moafian, 2023) and the L2 motivational self-system (Tseng, 2021). Nonetheless, according to Mihaljević Djigunović and Nikolov (2019), studies employing Dörnyei's (2019) L2 motivational self-system did not yield meaningful outcomes due to children's developing abilities. However, the key role of learning experiences did.

Our findings are in line with these points. For example, Tseng (2021) found that YLs' motivation was significantly hampered by negative experiences such as traditional learning methods, teachers' punishment, which prevented YLs from pursuing their ideal selves. While YLs from disadvantaged families tended to develop strong "ought to" L2 selves, children from families with greater resources were more likely to establish their ideal L2 selves. In Tseng's (2021) study, a learner imagined interacting with foreigners overseas (ideal L2 self), but she was contradicted by the reality that she could not afford a trip abroad.

Overall, favorable selves may not prevent demotivation resulting from negative language learning experiences. For example, Lamb (2012) relied on his study on the L2 motivational self-system model to investigate the motivation of learners aged 13 to 14, but his study failed to elicit the ought-to L2 self.

Nikolov (1999) argued that the conventional view on motivation did not offer an age-appropriate framework for typical FL classroom contexts. Recent studies on attitudes and motivation have reinforced the need to focus on classroom dynamics. Mihaljević Djigunović and Nikolov (2019) proposed a new framework for researching YLs' motivation to learn an FL. They suggested exploring how children's motivated learning behavior (MLB) interacts with their teachers' motivation and how children's MLB changes over time based on how they perceive significant others, including their parents, teachers, and peers, as well as other internal and external factors related to the learners and the classroom. None of the 28 studies compared the motivation of YLs and that of their teachers, although it is reasonable to assume that they interact.

Regarding the research design in the publications, ten studies used multiple instruments and triangulated their findings. These inquiries obtained deeper insights into young EFL learners' motivation and task engagement, but only through one lens, as no studies used multiple data sources and all involved only children. Seventeen publications included cross-sectional studies, whereas eleven were longitudinal lasting two years (Liu et al., 2017), one academic year (Kanonire et al., 2022; Oga-Baldwin et al., 2017), and the shorter ones covering six weeks (Huang, 2011; Lan et al., 2015; Table 1). Clearly, as young learners are slower than older learners (Nikolov & Mihaljević Djigunović, 2019), tapping into how their motivation and engagement with certain tasks change would require more longitudinal studies with ecologically valid results.

As for the data collection instruments (RQ3), questionnaires were the most frequently used. Most authors adopted and adapted surveys from previous research (Azkarai & Kopinska, 2020), ensuring validity and reliability through pilot testing (Liu et al., 2016, 2017). Few researchers developed new instruments implementing innovative ideas. Oga-Baldwin et al. (2017) used an engagement scale of eleven items assessing cognitive, emotional, and behavioral engagement, although they failed to measure two other dimensions of engagement, namely, agentic and social engagement, as conceptualized in a multi-component construct constituting five dimensions (Zare & Derakhshan, 2024). Therefore, the study might have overlooked certain engagement dimensions leading to an incomplete understanding of children's learning processes. However, the authors may have omitted these dimensions because YLs' cognitive development is not well developed, and they are still dependent on the teacher. They are not fully autonomous, as their agentic engagement is still developing.

Also, YLs are self-centred at this stage; their social engagement is also fluid (Nikolov & Mihaljević Djigunović, 2019; Pinter, 2009, 2011). Additionally, not all the engagement dimensions were researched in the adult EFL context either. What dimensions need to be included or excluded depends on the need, purpose, and topic of the research.

Some of the studies investigated how learners engaged in specific tasks and used various measures to quantify their engagement. This outcome aligns with Hiver et al.'s (2024) finding in their systematic review of studies on engagement: the authors adopted multiple measurements and complementary data sources to understand the dimensions of L2 engagement.

Concerning RQ4, the studies offered evidence that YLs enjoyed oral tasks, games, and playful activities (Andreani & Ying, 2019; Vidergor, 2021). These results are in line with what Mihaljević Djigunović and Nikolov (2019), Nikolov (2016), and Pinter (2011) claimed about YLs' motivation changing according to their age and the

types of tasks they engage in. Children enjoyed some fun elements such as "music and rhythm, songs, and rhymes accompanied by physical activities," with a focus on meaning (Nikolov & Mihaljević Djigunović, 2019, p. 12), aligning with Pinter's (2009, 2011) emphasis on stories and creative and physical activities. These insights should guide teachers in enhancing YLs' willingness to learn and use English.

For YLs, tasks should prioritize listening comprehension, speaking, and interaction. Nonetheless, only one study examined children's listening comprehension at ages 9 to 10 (Liao et al., 2023), and five investigated their speaking skills (ages 9–12; García Mayo & Ainara Imaz, 2019).

Nikolov (2016) highlighted that literacy skills should be introduced when children are literate in their first language; Pinter (2011) argued that YLs tend to have limited reading and writing skills. Thus, 9 to 11-year-old YLs must be socialized into learning L2 literacy skills by integrating some diagnostic assessment tasks (Nikolov, 2016) with playful components (Butler, 2015). Five studies targeted YLs' reading comprehension (ages 6–11; He et al., 2014; Kanonire et al., 2022), and six examined their writing abilities (ages 8–12; Azkarai & Kopinska, 2020; Coyle & Roca de Larios, 2020).

Mihaljević Djigunović and Nikolov (2019) argued that tasks for 12 to 14-year-old students tend to be more demanding, often integrating diagnostic assessment and self-assessment, as they allow learners to compare performances with one another. Such tasks include real-world use of L2 (Butler, 2015; Guo et al., 2023). Task characteristics such as the level of support provided, the challenge embedded in the tasks, and the nature of the tasks can influence engagement (Hiver et al., 2024). Overall, most task types used in the 28 studies were appropriate for YLs' age, grade, and skills. While some studies provided reading tasks for 6 to 11-year-old learners (Naderi & Moafian, 2023) and writing tasks for 8 to 10-year-old children (García Mayo & Ainara Imaz, 2019), the level of difficulty varied appropriately to match YLs' English proficiency.

Some factors enhanced learners' motivation. First, integrating technology into teaching, for example, augmented reality games (Liao et al., 2023), increased interest and engagement, aligning with Mohammed et al.'s (2024) study, which also documented that gamification enhanced motivation. Second, parents' perceptions, beliefs, and provision of opportunities for English language use outside of school (Butler, 2015), along with their engagement (He et al., 2014) and expectations (Tseng, 2021) also contributed to YLs' motivation. These outcomes are consistent with the study by Wallace and Leong (2020), which documented how parental rewards and expectations influenced children's level of motivation.

We found that YLs' task engagement was influenced by the classroom environment (Oga-Baldwin et al., 2017), a result aligning with the findings of previous studies (Cayubit, 2022; Derakhshan et al., 2022). Hiver et al. (2024) indicated that individual and situational factors, such as students' experiences and the instructional context, influence engagement. Additionally, pedagogical conditions that enhance language learning emphasize active involvement, commitment, and willingness to participate. All of these are crucial for fostering learner agency and engagement.

The findings offered evidence that innovative approaches like using narratives and CLIL enhanced children's engagement and motivation in line with previous studies (Azpilicueta-Martínez & Lázaro-Ibarrola, 2023; Lázaro-Ibarrola & Azpilicueta-Martínez, 2021; Zhu et al., 2024). Hence, teachers of YLs must be knowledgeable about innovations (Cameron, 2001) and benefit from being specialists in teaching additional languages to YLs (Murphy, 2014).

Collaborative learning and peer interaction (Azkarai & Kopinska, 2020; Lan et al., 2015) also positively affected children's motivation, supporting the findings by Hiver et al. (2024) that social interactions and cooperative activities play a significant role in task engagement. Thus, teachers should consider these outcomes when they want to enhance their pupils' motivation and engagement in their classrooms.

Conclusion and Implications

This systematic review analyzed 28 empirical studies published over the past decade on young EFL learners' motivation and task engagement during their first years of language learning. Although the studies used various theories and research designs and collected data with various instruments and tasks, we still have limited insights into what motivates young learners to engage with L2 tasks in various contexts. Clearly, uses of technology, gamification, and innovative task types involving interaction and collaboration were conducive to motivating YLs to engage with meaning-focused tasks, as they were intrinsically motivating.

Within the shifting context of task design, technology, and gamification, the pivotal influence of teachers, especially concerning their support and responsiveness to learners, remains inadequately examined. Research must acknowledge that teachers play a key role beyond implementing tasks. They actively cultivate motivational environments through their interaction with their pupils, scaffolding techniques, and feedback strategies. Specifically, how teachers provide feedback, the extent to which it is autonomy-supportive, formative, and motivating, can greatly impact their pupils' engagement, perseverance, and

derive meaning from language activities. Consequently, research that not only continues to explore various task types but also investigates the nuances of teacher behavior and classroom interaction in shaping YLs' motivation and engagement is needed. Also, more longitudinal studies are necessary to reveal how and why children's motivation and willingness to engage with certain tasks change over time. A deeper insight into these dynamics will enhance pedagogical practices and the development of teacher training programs aimed at maintaining young learners' motivation and engagement in EFL education.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Our review has some limitations. First, it included only 28 studies found in the ScienceDirect and WoS databases. Articles published in edited volumes, theses, and languages other than English were not reviewed. Future studies should include more publications.

The current research suggests that integrating child-centered theoretical frameworks and research methodologies can provide a more comprehensive understanding of YLs' L2 learning motivation. Researchers should use mixed methods to find out more about YLs' reasons for engaging with a much wider range of tasks, and use triangulation of data from various sources, including teachers' and parents' views, and children's self-reports and other data.

More longitudinal studies should track student motivation and engagement over time rather than focusing on a single class or moment. They would provide a clearer understanding of how engagement evolves in response to task characteristics or teaching methods. Observational data, real-time feedback, and interviews with children could offer further insights. Additionally, exploring how motivation and engagement relate to long-term L2 outcomes, such as skill retention or metacognition, would offer a more comprehensive picture.

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ORCID iDs

Mai Sri Lena https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1835-1963
Marianne Nikolov https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5844-4729

Ethical Considerations

This study was a systematic review, we did not involve humans, therefore, these considerations were not relevant for this study.

Author Contributions

Mai Sri Lena: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing, Methodology, Visualization. Marianne Nikolov: Supervision, Data curation, Formal analysis, Validation, Writing – review & editing.

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The datasets created and/or examined in this study can be obtained from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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