

Merging Art and English to Cultivate Intrinsic Motivation in Language Learning

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ABSTRACT

Art and the English language have traditionally been treated as distinct subjects in Malaysian schools, each bringing its own set of challenges and rewards. In Higher Learning Institutions (HLIs), English language courses have generally followed a utilitarian approach—focused on enhancing academic proficiency or preparing students for the workforce. As a result, students' motivation to learn English tends to be extrinsically driven. This paper explores the impact of a course designed for students in a HLI, which merges Art in an English class. Specifically, this paper looks at student's motivation and overall perceptions towards art in learning English language. A qualitative case study approach was adopted for this study, drawing on data collected via semi-structured focus group interviews with ten students and analysis of student coursework. The findings suggest that students' motivation to participate in the course was largely driven by their interest in art, with the course offering them opportunities to exercise their artistic skills. The integration of art encouraged creativity and self-expression, alleviating much of the anxiety associated with traditional language learning. This fostered enjoyment and success in completing tasks both inside and outside the classroom. The implications of this study suggest that art can be an effective tool for motivating students in HLIs to learn English intrinsically, beyond mere academic or professional requirements.

Keywords: Arts; English Language; Intrinsic Motivation; Language Learning; Higher Education.

INTRODUCTION

In Malaysian Higher Learning Institutions (HLIs), English language instruction has traditionally adopted a utilitarian framework—primarily aimed at enhancing academic proficiency or preparing students for workplace communication. Rarely do the language classes provide enjoyment and appreciation that could inspire a more extensive use of the language beyond course requirement. While effective in meeting institutional goals, this approach often results in extrinsically motivated learners who engage with English only to fulfill course requirements. Consequently, students' language proficiency—particularly in vocabulary, expression, creativity, and communicative readiness—remains limited and underdeveloped.

To be proficient is the ultimate goal in language learning. Despite over a decade of formal English education from primary through secondary school, many Malaysian university students still struggle to attain functional proficiency by the time they graduate. Recent reports highlight that poor command of English continues to hinder graduate employability, with employers citing communication barriers as a key concern (Ahmad Powzi 2025, Jobstreet 2015 in Zainuddin et al. 2019). Graduates from largely public universities have very poor command of the English language as they use it very minimally in a mainly Malay language dominated environment. (Ujang, 2019). This issue is especially pronounced in public universities, where Malay remains the dominant medium of instruction and interaction, further reducing students' exposure to English (Lee 2025).

To address this persistent gap, the study reported in this paper explores the integration of art as a pedagogical

tool in English language teaching at the tertiary level. Art and English Language have always been two completely different entities in schools in Malaysia. Each bring about its own set of learning challenges, enjoyment and outcomes. Art offers a creative and emotionally engaging context that contrasts with the rigid, exam-oriented structure of conventional language courses. By embedding language learning within artistic expression—such as visual storytelling, drama, and creative writing—educators can foster intrinsic motivation, personal enjoyment, and deeper appreciation of the language. This approach aligns with current educational trends in Malaysia that emphasize creativity, critical thinking, and cultural literacy as essential 21st-century skills (www.ipgce.com).

In an effort to enhance the personal relevance and enjoyment of English language learning beyond its conventional utilitarian framework, this study explores the integration of art as a pedagogical tool. The primary objective is to improve students' language proficiency by situating learning within a creative and enjoyable context that diverges from the structure of their mainstream academic courses. It is posited that such an approach can foster intrinsic motivation, leading students to engage with the language more meaningfully and consistently. By using art, it is hoped that language learning becomes a more stimulating and emotionally resonant experience. Given that language acquisition is a skill that requires sustained practice and exposure, cultivating intrinsic interest is essential. This approach aims to empower students to take ownership of their learning process, thereby promoting autonomy and the development of independent language learners.

The objective of this study is to investigate how art-based instruction can enhance students' motivation and perception toward learning English. It aims to determine whether such an approach can cultivate autonomous learners who engage with the language beyond the classroom, ultimately leading to improved proficiency and communicative confidence.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Using Art to teach English Language

A growing body of research supports the integration of art as an effective pedagogical tool for language instruction. Studies have shown that art-based learning enhances cognitive development, creativity, and linguistic expression across diverse educational contexts (Burton, Horowitz, & Abeles, 1999; Farokhi & Hashemi, 2012; Ruiz, 2010). In Malaysia, art education traditionally focuses on visual arts—such as drawing, painting, and crafting techniques like *batik* and weaving—while performing arts are largely relegated to extracurricular activities (Malachi, 2016). Art is typically taught as a standalone subject, with limited cross-disciplinary integration, particularly in language education. However, recent educational reforms and global trends have begun to shift this paradigm. The Malaysian government's National Creative Industry Policy and the establishment of the Ministry of Tourism, Arts and Culture have signaled increased support for creative education, including its role in cultivating critical thinking and cultural literacy (www.ipgce.com). Despite these initiatives, the integration of art into core subjects like English remains underutilized in public institutions.

Art-based instruction offers a range of cognitive and affective benefits. Eisner (2002) emphasized that art stimulates fluency, originality, focused perception, and imagination—skills essential for language acquisition. Walling (2002) further noted that incorporating art into education can improve motivation, attendance, multicultural understanding, and higher-order thinking. More recent research confirms that art fosters emotional resilience, task persistence, and ownership of learning, while also promoting social cohesion and collaborative skills (Iyengar, 2025).

In the context of language learning, art facilitates the use of metaphor, idiomatic expressions, similes, and neologisms, enriching students' descriptive and interpretive capacities (Heath & Wolf, 2005; Eisner & Viebrock, 2013). Heath and Wolf's (2005) study demonstrated that integrating art into language instruction led to increased creativity, vocabulary expansion, and expressive fluency among school children. Ruiz (2010) similarly found a positive correlation between art-based learning and improved literacy and reading comprehension. Recent innovations in educational technology have further expanded the possibilities of art-integrated language learning. For example, virtual museum visits and digital storytelling platforms have been shown to enhance vocabulary acquisition, cultural awareness, and expressive confidence among English language learners (El-Baz, 2025).

These multimodal approaches align with TESOL standards and support both linguistic and socio-emotional development.

While earlier studies focused primarily on primary and secondary education, the current study extends this inquiry to the tertiary level, where English is often taught with a utilitarian focus. By embedding art into English language instruction at Malaysian universities, this study search seeks to explore its potential to foster intrinsic motivation and autonomous learning—an area that has received limited attention in prior scholarship.

Intrinsic Motivation in Language Learning

Intrinsic motivation, defined as engaging in an activity for its inherent satisfaction rather than for external rewards (Ryan & Deci, 2000), plays a pivotal role in successful language acquisition. In contrast to extrinsic motivators—such as grades, praise, or employment prospects—intrinsic motivation is characterized by personal interest, enjoyment, and a sense of autonomy. Reeve and Nix (2003) further conceptualize intrinsic motivation as the degree of voluntary engagement with a learning activity in the absence of external pressures or incentives. Despite its recognized importance, language learning in Malaysian universities remains largely instrumental. As Johnson (2001) observed, learners are often driven by pragmatic goals such as career advancement, financial gain, or social status. This utilitarian orientation may limit deeper engagement with the language and hinder the development of long-term proficiency.

Recent research continues to affirm the value of intrinsic motivation in second language (L2) learning. A meta-analysis by Alamer et al. (2025) found that autonomous forms of motivation—specifically intrinsic and identified regulation—were positively correlated with L2 achievement ($r = .26$ and $r = .16$, respectively), while controlled forms of motivation showed no significant relationship. Moreover, autonomous motivation was associated with reduced language anxiety, suggesting a dual benefit for both performance and emotional well-being.

Interest, a key driver of intrinsic motivation, is also central to sustained language engagement. Beswick (2017) described interest as a state of affective arousal triggered by novelty or conceptual challenge. Ainley, Hidi, and Berndorff (2002, as cited in Beswick) characterized this state by focused attention, heightened cognitive and emotional functioning, and persistent effort. The feeling of interest involves positive affect, directed attention, and impulses to act—elements that align closely with the motivational and cognitive demands of language learning. In 2025, language education trends increasingly emphasize creating stimulating and emotionally engaging environments to foster intrinsic motivation. Immersive technologies such as augmented and virtual reality (AR/VR), gamified platforms, and personalized learning paths have been shown to enhance learner interest and autonomy (Global Lingua, 2025; IntelligentHQ, 2025). These innovations support multimodal learning and cultural fluency, shifting the focus from rote memorization to meaningful communication and personal relevance.

The current study builds on this body of work by examining how art-based instruction can serve as a catalyst for intrinsic motivation in English language learning. Unlike previous studies that focused primarily on technological or curriculum-based interventions, this research explores the affective and cognitive impact of artistic engagement—an area that remains underexplored at the tertiary level in Malaysia.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative approach within a case study paradigm. This approach was selected to allow for an in-depth examination of students' experiences within the course -English via Art and Craft - emphasizing the richness and complexity of students' perceptions and interactions. This course uses art and craft as a learning tool to encourage and enhance students' ability to communicate ideas, thoughts and feelings in an articulate and confident manner. The course was designed to integrate art as the central medium for language learning activities throughout the semester. Instructional strategies included:

1. Art journals for reflective writing and vocabulary development;
2. Workshops focused on visual interpretation and craft-based learning;
3. Group projects involving collaborative creation and presentation; and
4. Oral presentations based on artistic themes and personal expression.

Among the activities conducted in the course are (i) Interpreting and illustrating the seven elements of art, followed by verbal presentations of individual interpretations; (ii) Learning a craft and teaching it to peers, fostering both linguistic and procedural communication and (iii) Distinguishing between concrete and abstract language, and translating these concepts into visual representations. These activities were designed to stimulate creativity, encourage personal engagement, and provide meaningful contexts for language use.

Participants

A total of ten undergraduate students voluntarily participated in this study. These students were selected from the English via Art and Craft class based on their willingness to engage in interviews and allow their coursework to be analyzed. The sample included students from diverse field of study and varying levels of English proficiency. The students' age ranges from 21 to 24 years old. It should be emphasised that for reasons of confidentiality in this study, the students are identified only by using alphanumerical codes.

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured focus group interviews, conducted at the end of the semester in two separate groups of five participants each. Each session lasted approximately 40 to 45 minutes and was facilitated by the researchers in a neutral setting to encourage open dialogue. The interviews explored students' perceptions, experiences, and motivational responses to the art-based English instruction, including reflections on classroom activities, assessment methods, and perceived language development.

Interview questions were loosely adapted from the Intrinsic Motivation Inventory (IMI) developed by Ryan and Deci (2000), a validated multidimensional instrument used to assess participants' subjective experiences related to intrinsic motivation and self-regulation. For the purpose of this study, three subscales from the IMI were selected:

- (i) Interest/Enjoyment: to gauge students' affective engagement with the course;
- (ii) Pressure/Tension: to assess emotional responses and stress levels; and
- (iii) Perceived Competence: to evaluate students' self-assessed language ability and confidence.

Data Analysis

All interviews were transcribed verbatim and subjected to thematic analysis. Thematic coding was conducted manually, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework: familiarization with data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. Emergent themes were triangulated with students' coursework artifacts (e.g., journal entries, visual projects) to enhance validity and provide contextual depth.

FINDINGS

This section presents the significant findings of the study by reporting three subscales of the Intrinsic Motivation Inventory (IMI) (Ryan and Deci 2000) emerged from the data analysis.

Interest / Enjoyment

The Interest/Enjoyment subscale is regarded as the most direct self-report measure of intrinsic motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000). In this study, students' responses from focus group interviews were analyzed for keywords and expressions that indicated emotional engagement, personal interest, and enjoyment in the art-integrated English

via Art and Craft course.

It is interesting to note that students consistently associated the course with positive affective experiences. For example, one student (S7) remarked, “*Maybe because the class was **fun**. The class **didn’t stress me** not like the other classes where we have to focus on the factful things. Yeah, this class was **fun***”. This statement reflects a clear contrast between the art-based course and more conventional academic settings, highlighting reduced stress and increased enjoyment.

Another student (S1) stated, “*The **main reason I join this class is because of art**.*” indicating that the artistic component was a primary motivator for enrollment. Similarly, S2 described the class as “*an **escape** for me from the stress and everything,*” elaborating that “*when I do the arts, I feel like **pretty much bringing out all the things inside my mind on a piece of paper***.” These reflections suggest that the course provided a therapeutic and expressive outlet, contributing to intrinsic engagement.

Further evidence of enjoyment was found in students’ descriptions of specific tasks. S1 shared, “*But the drawing part is actually interesting like the 7-days drawing. **I got started and then I just finished 3 drawings in a day**. It’s kind of interesting,*” while S6 expressed appreciation for a creative interpretation task: “*For example, the sound of the tree. We don’t necessarily have to draw a tree just to visualize the sound. **I really love that part***.”. These comments reflect genuine enthusiasm and immersion in the learning process.

Art is mentioned here as an important indicator that motivated students in this course. S1 stated that it is the reason for joining the class. The word *escape* was used to describe the feelings of being in the class S2 followed by *pretty much bringing out all the things inside my mind on a piece of paper*. S3 stated *I got started and then I just finished 3 drawings in a day*” and S6 expression of “*I really love that part*” are in regards to their journal writing tasks. This indicates genuine enjoyment towards tasks and activities in the course.

When asked to associate emotions or feelings with the course, students used terms such as “*anticipation,*” “*excitement,*” “*curiosity,*” and “*happy*”. These descriptors align with the constructs of interest and enjoyment, suggesting that the course fostered a positive emotional climate conducive to intrinsic motivation. However, two students expressed feelings of “*worry*” and “*mixed feelings,*” which were later attributed to their limited prior experience with art. These concerns were not related to the language component but rather to apprehension about fulfilling art-based tasks.

Overall, the findings from this subscale indicate that the integration of art into English language instruction significantly enhanced students’ intrinsic motivation. The course was perceived not only as enjoyable but also as a meaningful and emotionally engaging experience, supporting the hypothesis that creative contexts can foster deeper investment in language learning.

Pressure/ Tension

This component focuses on the student’s emotional responses—specifically feelings of anxiety, nervousness, or relaxation—during task engagement. Students were asked to reflect on their emotional states while completing both in-class and out-of-class activities, particularly those involving art-based tasks.

Findings indicate that the course was widely perceived as a low-pressure and emotionally supportive environment, which contributed to reduced anxiety and increased confidence in language use. For instance, S2 described the class as “*an **escape** for me from all the subjects (faculty) as they’re really stressful (for me). And this class is really stress-free*”. This remark suggests that the art-integrated approach provided a psychological reprieve from the more rigid and evaluative nature of conventional academic courses.

S8 emphasized the relaxed atmosphere, stating, “*The class is like very relax, and you **don’t feel really pressured** even though you made mistake in speaking (vocab or grammar). We don’t feel like “Oh no, I am wrong, I’ve made mistakes”. That boosts up our confidence*”. This reflects a shift in classroom dynamics where errors were not penalized but viewed as part of the learning process, thereby fostering a more open and risk-tolerant communicative environment.

S7, in reference to journal writing tasks, noted, *“Although it’s hard, since it is a thing that I really like so it’s not that stressful to complete the task.”* This highlights the role of personal interest in mitigating perceived difficulty and emotional strain. S7 described the course as a *“Stress reliever. Because it’s also allows us to be more creative by doing painting”* attributing this to the creative freedom offered through painting and other artistic activities.

These responses consistently featured descriptors such as *“escape,” “stress-free,” “relax,” “not pressured,”* and *“stress reliever,”* indicating that the course design effectively minimized anxiety typically associated with second language (L2) learning. This aligns with Krashen’s (1984) affective filter hypothesis, which posits that anxiety can inhibit language acquisition. By embedding language practice within art-based tasks, the course shifted the focus from linguistic accuracy to creative expression, thereby lowering the affective filter and enhancing communicative confidence.

More importantly, language use was framed as a means of articulating artistic intent, rather than as an isolated skill subject to scrutiny. This repositioning allowed students to engage with English more naturally and fluently, as they were primarily focused on conveying the meaning and emotion behind their artwork. As a result, students demonstrated greater willingness to speak and write in English, even when unsure of vocabulary or grammar, suggesting that the art context provided a buffer against performance anxiety.

In summary, the integration of art into English language instruction significantly reduced pressure and tension among students. The emotionally safe and creatively stimulating environment enabled learners to take linguistic risks, express themselves more freely, and develop greater fluency and confidence in both written and spoken English.

Perceived Competence

The Perceived Competence component refers to students’ self-perceived ability to successfully complete tasks and their confidence in their skills. In this study, students demonstrated a growing sense of competence in both their English language abilities and artistic expression as a result of participating in the English via Art and Craft course.

Students’ responses related to the art journal writing tasks revealed that they became more mindful and confident of their language abilities, particularly in vocabulary and grammar, as well as artistic abilities. The students revealed that the writing tasks have encouraged them to self-assess and become more mindful of their writing skills. In this sense it has greatly promoted a sense of autonomous learning among the students. This reflective practice encouraged self-monitoring and correction, contributing to the development of autonomous learning behaviors. For instance, S3 noted, *“In art journal we can improve our **vocabulary** and I have to brainstorm my mind to acknowledge **new words**”* while S4 shared, *“Yes, when I write reflection I’m always aware of **my grammar**. It was like “always write in past tense, right, in reflection?” So I will always look up for the grammar. It made me improve that.”* These comments suggest that the writing component of the course fostered metalinguistic awareness and self-directed improvement.

S10 acknowledged making grammatical errors but emphasized the process of self-correction: *“Yeah. And I think I did a lot of grammar mistakes... Yes. **Vocab and grammar, both.**”* Similarly, S2 remarked, *“**Practice** for us as English is all about practice,”* reinforcing the idea that consistent engagement with language tasks contributed to perceived growth in proficiency.

The Art component in the course was integral to many of the language activities and thus students had many activities involving drawing and painting and even crafting in the classroom. This aspect has resulted in student’s motivation to take up the course, their motivation in task completion and their perceived skill competence. S7 stated, *“I think my **artistic abilities have improved**. It’s actually **improved my creativity** a bit.”* while S10 reflected, *“**I have improved my artistic abilities**. As I never thought I could draw or paint.”* These expressions indicate that the integration of art not only supported language learning but also enhanced students’ self-efficacy in a domain they previously viewed with uncertainty.

S4 and S6 both linked their improved art skills to increased motivation: *“Joining this subject, I think **my art skill***

is becoming better. And that makes me feel motivated.” (S4) and “*As time progressed, I felt more fun in doing the task and I’m also more confident about my skills, so I guess I’m more motivated to do art in class.*” (S6). Notably, S5 expressed interest in pursuing further art-based learning: “*Later I want to join more art class like this,*” suggesting that the course may have had a lasting impact on students’ academic interests and self-perception. After taking the course students perception towards their art skills improved. They feel that they can draw and paint better, have more confidence in their artistic abilities and are more motivated to do art-based task. S5 statement may indicate the impact of art towards student’s future endeavor.

Taken together, these findings indicate that the art-integrated approach fostered a dual sense of competence—linguistic and artistic—which contributed to students’ motivation, engagement, and autonomy. The opportunity to express themselves creatively while practicing English enabled learners to build confidence in a supportive and non-evaluative environment, reinforcing the value of interdisciplinary methods in language education.

DISCUSSION

This study aimed to explore the potential of cultivating intrinsic motivation in language learning through the integration of art-based instruction. Art, often associated with enjoyment and personal expression, was strategically merged with English language learning to create a more engaging and emotionally resonant educational experience. The findings of this study offer some insights into the motivational impact of this interdisciplinary approach.

It is interesting to note that the Interest/Enjoyment e serves as the most direct measure of intrinsic motivation. Student responses consistently reflected positive affective experiences, describing the course as “fun,” “an escape from stress,” and “motivating.”. The students also associated their engagement with emotions such as *excitement, curiosity, anticipation, and happiness*. These descriptors suggest that the integration of art into language instruction successfully fostered a learning environment that was both stimulating and emotionally supportive.

The findings underscore the value of creative pedagogical strategies in enhancing learner motivation beyond extrinsic rewards. By embedding language tasks within artistic contexts, students were able to engage with English in a manner that felt personally meaningful and enjoyable. This supports the broader theoretical framework of self-determination theory, which posits that intrinsic motivation is driven by interest, autonomy, and perceived competence (Ryan & Deci, 2000). The findings of the study affirm that art-based instruction can serve as a powerful catalyst for intrinsic engagement in language learning.

The Pressure/Tension subscale is typically interpreted as a negative indicator, reflecting emotional strain or anxiety that may hinder learning. However, in this study, student responses revealed a contrasting experience. Participants consistently described the course as “*stress-free*”, “*relaxing*”, and “*an escape*” from the pressures of their other academic subjects. This emotionally supportive environment appeared to foster increased confidence in both language use and artistic expression. The reduction in anxiety aligns with Krashen’s (1983) affective filter hypothesis, which posits that low-stress environments facilitate language acquisition.

The Perceived Competence subscale further illuminated students’ self-assessed success in completing course tasks. As Williams and Gill (1995) suggest, competence in learning is often demonstrated through task achievement. Throughout the semester, students engaged in a range of activities—including art production, written reflections, group projects, and workshops—all conducted in English. Their reflections indicated notable improvements in vocabulary, grammar, and overall language proficiency. Students also reported enhanced artistic skills, expressing increased confidence in their ability to draw, paint, and interpret visual concepts.

These findings are consistent with prior research by Heath and Wolf (2005) and Ruiz (2010), who observed that integrating art into language instruction led to measurable gains in vocabulary and reading skills among school-aged learners. Similarly, participants in this study recognized improvements in their linguistic abilities, particularly in vocabulary acquisition and grammatical accuracy, as well as in their capacity to produce and discuss art. The dual development of language and artistic competence suggests that art-based instruction not only enriches the learning experience but also supports holistic skill growth in tertiary-level language learners.

These preliminary findings suggest promising potential for the use of art-based instruction in motivating L2 learners within HLIs. Student responses reflected heightened levels of interest and enjoyment, alongside reduced anxiety typically associated with language learning. The integration of art appeared to create a more emotionally supportive and cognitively engaging environment, enabling learners to interact with English in a meaningful and less pressured manner.

Moreover, students reported increased awareness of their language use, particularly in vocabulary and grammar, indicating a perceived improvement in linguistic competence. This self-monitoring behavior aligns with the development of autonomous learning, a key goal in language education. While the scope of this study is limited by its small sample size, the findings provide a foundation for future research. Expanding the participant pool across multiple institutions and diverse learner profiles would offer a more comprehensive understanding of the impact of art-based pedagogy on language acquisition.

The pedagogical implications of this study are noteworthy. Educators in HLIs may consider incorporating art as a medium for language expression, creative thinking, and visual literacy. By embedding artistic elements into language instruction, teachers can foster intrinsic motivation, support multimodal learning, and sustain genuine interest that extends beyond the classroom. Such approaches may contribute to more holistic and enduring language development among tertiary-level learners.

CONCLUSIONS

This study has explored the integration of art as a pedagogical tool to enhance intrinsic motivation and language proficiency among tertiary-level English language learners in a Malaysian HLI. Drawing on the data gathered from students enrolled in the English via Art and Craft class, the findings revealed that art-based instruction fostered a learning environment characterized by enjoyment, emotional safety, and increased self-perceived competence. Students reported heightened interest in the course, reduced anxiety, and greater awareness of their language use, particularly in vocabulary and grammar. The creative and multimodal nature of the tasks—ranging from visual art production to reflective writing and collaborative projects—enabled students to engage with English in a personally meaningful and expressive manner. This approach not only supported linguistic development but also cultivated autonomy and confidence, key attributes for sustained language learning.

While the study was limited by its small sample size, the results offer valuable insights into the potential of interdisciplinary methods in language education. Future research should consider expanding the participant base and exploring longitudinal effects of art-integrated instruction on language proficiency and learner motivation. Pedagogically, the findings encourage educators to rethink traditional language teaching practices and consider the inclusion of art as a dynamic and enriching component of the curriculum. By leveraging the affective and cognitive benefits of artistic engagement, language instruction can become more inclusive, engaging, and effective, ultimately supporting students in becoming confident, autonomous users of the English language.

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