The Interplay Between L2 Motivation and Proficiency in Predicting EFL Learners' Pragmatic Engagement

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Abstract—Drawing on self-determination theory and L2 pragmatics, this study scrutinizes how two motivational dimensions (autonomous and controlled) can affect EFL learners' behavioral engagement in learning pragmatics across various English proficiency levels. One hundred ninety-eight Saudi EFL learners were surveyed for their English proficiency level, L2 motivation, and pragmatic engagement. The findings revealed an overall significant positive correlation between EFL learners' L2 motivation and pragmatic engagement. Autonomous and controlled motivations were significantly and positively correlated with pragmatic engagement among all the English proficiency groups. Learners with advanced proficiency exhibited significantly higher correlations than their counterparts, indicating that L2 motivation mediated by proficiency predicted pragmatic engagement. Learners with higher levels of English proficiency were more sensitive to the pragmatic aspects of the language and, therefore, more motivated toward active engagement in pragmatically oriented contexts than intermediate and upper-intermediate learners.

Index Terms—autonomous motivation, controlled motivation, L2 motivation, pragmatic engagement, self-determination theory

I. INTRODUCTION

There is a consensus among L2 pragmatics researchers that foreign language (FL) learners do not acquire pragmatic competence in an identical manner. This variability can be attributed to documented evidence wherein researchers have examined the interrelationship between learners' variables, contextual factors, and the development of pragmatic abilities (Taguchi et al., 2022). Factors such as gender and cognitive abilities (e.g., Malmir & Derakhshan, 2020), motivation, (e.g., Zhang & Papi, 2021), personality (e.g., Taguchi, 2019), proficiency (e.g., Sağdıç, 2021), and aptitude (e.g., Derakhshan & Malmir, 2021) play a significant role, particularly among "participants within the same physical context, [or] over the same period" (Taguchi & Roever, 2017, p. 209), in providing fundamental insights into how pragmatic aspects are observed and acquired within EFL contexts.

A substantial body of research on individual factors affecting L2 pragmatics has predominantly focused on the impact of proficiency on second language learning. However, research investigating other factors, such as motivation, is limited (Khansir & Pakdel, 2021; Takahashi, 2015; Takahashi, 2019; Taguchi, 2019). These studies generally indicate that L2 learners who are intrinsically motivated and have a stronger communication-oriented motivation are more likely to achieve superior pragmatic competence. Despite these studies suggesting a role for motivation in L2 pragmatic competence, the influence of autonomous and controlled motivations on learners' pragmatic competence remains underexplored. In fact, motivation has often been utilized as a post hoc explanation for inconsistencies and mixed findings in the levels of L2 pragmatics literature among learners (Zhang & Papi, 2021), rather than being acknowledged as a crucial factor in learners' development of L2 competence. Another key factor in predicting interlanguage pragmatic (ILP) development is engagement. However, research on this factor is relatively scarce, both in the broader context of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) (Henry & Thorsen, 2020; Mercer, 2019) and specifically in the area of interlanguage pragmatics (Sanjaya et al., 2022). How various individual factors might interact to predict L2 pragmatic learning is also under-studied (Taguchi & Roever, 2017). This underscores the need for further exploration of these factors to better understand their role in language learning and pragmatic development.

Consequently, this study aims to address the research gap by examining the interplay among three learner-related factors—proficiency, motivation, and engagement—in the process of pragmatic learning among EFL learners. Specifically, this research investigates the extent to which L2 motivation, as mediated by different proficiency groups, may influence L2 pragmatic engagement. It also explores whether autonomous and controlled motivations serve as indicators of pragmatic engagement in EFL environments. By doing so, the study enriches the L2 pragmatic literature, providing evidence-based insights into how proficiency and motivational regulations (both autonomous and controlled) correlate and interact as indicators of behavioral engagement in L2 pragmatic learning.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The SLA literature indicates that learner-related factors and individual differences are among the most significant factors affecting students' L2 performance, including L2 pragmatics. Proficiency has long been documented as a determinant in the acquisition and development of L2 pragmatics. Proficiency refers to an individual's overall competence in the target language (in this study, English), encompassing both organizational and pragmatic knowledge. The former involves the knowledge required to organize utterances or sentences and texts (i.e., lexical and grammatical knowledge), whereas the latter pertains to the knowledge required to utilize sentences and texts appropriately in a given situation (Bachman & Palmer, 1996). Language proficiency is typically assessed using standardized tests, course or grade levels, length of formal instruction, and period of residence in the target language community (Sağdıç, 2021). For reliability purposes, standardized tests (e.g., TOEFL, IELTS) and course or grade levels are deemed more reliable indicators of proficiency than other means of language assessment. This is because these tests provide a basis for comparison among test takers, and course/grade levels are often based on a systematic evaluation within a course or program (Ren et al., 2022). The current study uses standardized tests to determine EFL learners' proficiency levels.

The focus on proficiency originates from the assumption that general proficiency is a prerequisite for pragmatic competence (see Taguchi et al., 2022). That is, learning L2 pragmatics requires learners to attain a certain level of proficiency. This implies a positive proficiency effect on L2 pragmatic performance, a finding supported by several empirical studies across proficiency levels (e.g., Sağdıç, 2021). Notably, however, previous research comparing L2 learners across proficiency levels with native speakers has demonstrated that higher proficiency does not necessarily result in native-like pragmatic performance (e.g., Kang et al., 2019). For a more comprehensive understanding of how proficiency influences L2 pragmatics, this study examines whether proficiency affects the quality of L2 motivation and, therefore, fosters pragmatic engagement among varying proficiency groups.

Motivation has also been featured as one of the factors affecting SLA, including the development of L2 pragmatics (Zarrinabadi et al., 2022). However, there have been studies examining the interplay between motivation and L2 pragmatic learning (Taguchi & Roever, 2017), focusing primarily on its effect on pragmalinguistic awareness (Takahashi, 2012, 2015; Tagashira et al., 2011) and pragmatic production (Khansir & Pakdel, 2021). For instance, pioneering work on motivation in ILP by Takahashi (2012, 2015) reported a strong correlation between pragmatic awareness and learners' motivation, particularly intrinsic motivation, but not between pragmatic awareness and proficiency. Tateyama (2001) further confirmed that highly motivated Japanese FL learners demonstrated better performance in pragmatic role-plays by producing the Japanese routine formula "sumimasen". Arabmofrad et al. (2019) investigated the interplay between Iranian EFL learners' specific and general ILP motivation and meta-pragmatic awareness. They found a significantly positive relationship between meta-pragmatic awareness and sub-constructs of pragmatic motivation. Drawing on self-determination theory (SDT) (Ryan & Deci, 2017, 2020) in ILP research, Tagashira, Yamato, and Isoda (2011) systematically examined L2 learners' motivation, focusing on various intrinsic and extrinsic motivations. They found that EFL learners' motivational profiles affected their pragmatic awareness and that those with higher self-regulation were more likely to recognize pragmatic errors.

Student engagement is a critical aspect in understanding how students respond to the teaching-learning process. It plays a pivotal role in shaping their academic experience. To investigate the connection between student engagement and second language (L2) motivation, especially in the context of pragmatic learning, the present study employs the SDT as an overarching framework. According to SDT, three fundamental psychological needs drive human behavior: competence, relatedness, and autonomy. The degree to which these needs are fulfilled or impeded influences the type of motivational regulation people exhibit, consequently shaping their level of engagement in L2 learning. Motivational regulations fall on a continuum of self-determination, including intrinsic, integrated, identified, introjected, external regulation, and amotivation (Ryan & Deci, 2017, 2020). Empirical investigations in second language acquisition (SLA) have classified these five motivational regulations into two major categories: autonomous motivation (including intrinsic, integrated, and identified regulations) and controlled motivation (encompassing introjected and external regulations) (Alamer, 2021). Autonomous motivation is driven by states of interest where the primary "reward" is the immediate feelings of accomplishment and pleasure associated with a behavior. In contrast, controlled motivation is driven by "externally imposed rewards" (Ryan & Deci, 2017, p. 14) or penalties. Ample research in general education has shown that autonomous and controlled motivations significantly contribute to academic success (Bureau et al., 2022; Mouratidis et al., 2021). However, there is a paucity of research on the impact of these motivational regulations on SLA, particularly L2 pragmatics. By examining these factors, this study aims to provide valuable insights into the dynamics of L2 motivation and engagement in pragmatic learning settings.

Similar to motivation, the concept of engagement as an individual factor is becoming increasingly prevalent in SLA research due to its potential to deepen our understanding of language learning (Henry & Thorsen, 2020). It also has a well-documented impact on student achievement (Brutt-Griffler & Jang, 2022; Skinner, 2016) and is notably malleable, making it conducive to pedagogical interventions and instructional practices (Fredricks et al., 2019; Skinner, 2016). Moreover, engagement is a meta-construct that encompasses cognitive, behavioral, social, and emotional involvement by learners in meaningful L2 learning activities. These activities occur in either formal or informal settings and are directed at mastering a second language over an extended period (Hiver et al., 2021). Ideally, learners should maintain control over their learning process, devote their energy and attention to the L2 material, and stay emotionally and

socially committed to achieving L2 competence (Ren et al., 2022). This study focuses particularly on behavioral engagement as it pertains to L2 pragmatic learning in EFL contexts.

Student engagement, characterized by active participation in the learning environment, is a complex construct influenced by a myriad of factors spanning both educational settings and individual student characteristics. These factors include, but are not limited to, motivation, proficiency, gender, and learning style. Consequently, the outcome and degree of learners' engagement may exhibit considerable variation across different classroom contexts (Fredricks et al., 2019). This underscores the importance of understanding the interplay between these determinants to foster a more inclusive and effective educational experience for all students. Motivation has been identified as one of the critical factors affecting engagement due to their close relation (Oga-Baldwin, 2019). According to Martin et al. (2017), motivation and engagement are two independent variables, with the former predicting the latter. Similarly, Henry (2021) viewed engagement as the behavioral outcome of motivation; thus, high levels of engagement presuppose high levels of motivation (Skinner, 2016). This perspective aligns with findings by Noels et al. (2000), who found that students who perceived language learning as personally meaningful and enjoyable were more likely to be engaged in the learning process. Moreover, Saeed and Zyngier (2012) demonstrated that learners exhibiting intrinsic or integrated regulated motivation displayed higher rates of spontaneous engagement in their academic tasks than those motivated extrinsically.

Reeve (2012) described the interplay between motivation and engagement as follows: "Motivation is a private, unobservable, psychological, neural, and biological process that serves as an antecedent cause to the publicly observable behavior, that is engagement" (p. 151). However, this interrelationship is not necessarily linear, as high levels of motivation do not always translate into high levels of engagement (Henry, 2021; Oga-Baldwin, 2019). Learners must transform this "willingness into sustained active engagement" (Mercer, 2019, p. 645) to achieve L2 learning, including L2 pragmatics. This necessitates further research on diverse educational contexts, focusing on how a variety of learner-related factors interact to predict language learning outcomes (Taguchi, 2019). Compared to motivation, there is a relative lack of research on L2 engagement, an area that remains largely unexplored, especially in relation to L2 pragmatics. Moreover, many questions regarding how various individual factors relate to each other remain unanswered.

This study aims to explore this under-researched area by investigating the extent to which the motivational dimensions (autonomous and controlled) of intermediate, upper-intermediate, and advanced EFL learners can predict behavioral engagement in L2 pragmatic learning. Therefore, it seeks to enrich the L2 pragmatic literature with evidence-based insights into the correlation between motivation and pragmatic engagement across different proficiency groups by attempting to answer the following research questions:

1. Do EFL learners at different proficiency levels exhibit variations in their L2 motivation and pragmatic engagement?
2. To what extent does EFL learners' L2 motivation at different proficiency levels contribute to pragmatic engagement?
3. Are there significant correlations between the autonomous and controlled dimensions of L2 motivation and pragmatic engagement across different proficiency groups?

III. METHODS

A. Participants

One hundred ninety-eight Saudi female EFL students, aged between 22 and 28 years (M = 25.46), were recruited for the study. Based on their scores on the Standardized Test of English Proficiency (STEP), as presented in Table 1, the participants were divided into three proficiency groups: intermediate (n = 75), upper-intermediate (n = 75), and advanced (n = 48). They had studied English for at least nine years during their formal education before enrolling in the four-year English undergraduate program. All participants were post-graduates of Prince Sattam bin Abdelaziz University and had, therefore, studied English as a foreign language for a total of at least 14 years during their formal education. None of them reported studying in an English-speaking country.

TABLE 1
PARTICIPANT DISTRIBUTION INTO THREE ENGLISH PROFICIENCY GROUPS

STEP score range	Proficiency level	No.	Mean
60–67	Intermediate	75	62.08
75–85	Upper-intermediate	75	80.48
86–97	Advanced	48	93.52

B. Instruments

Two research instruments were deployed in this study. First, a demographic survey was used to gather participants' characteristics, including their major, gender, and age. Second, the Standardized Test of English Proficiency (STEP), a validated test structured in accordance with the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, was used to measure English proficiency. This test is typically used for those applying for positions in education, higher education, admissions, scholarships, or other professional endeavors. The STEP consists of 100 questions that cover

reading comprehension, sentence structure, listening comprehension, and composition analysis. An online questionnaire, adopted from Sanjaya et al. (2022), was also utilized to gather data related to L2 motivation and pragmatic engagement. This questionnaire consists of 34 items, 28 of which reflect the participants' multidimensional motivations (autonomous vs. controlled) based on the SDT framework, and six items to track their level of engagement. Participants were asked to report their level of motivation and engagement on a six-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree). Autonomous motivation was assessed using 15 items (intrinsic motivation, k = 6; identified motivation, k = 9), while controlled motivation was checked using 13 items (introjected motivation, k = 7; external motivation, k = 6).

The pragmatic engagement test was designed to compare appropriateness with accuracy, focusing primarily on behavioral engagement, characterized by active participation in learning through practical behaviors such as effort, commitment, concentration, attention, and asking questions in class (Fredricks et al., 2019, p. 62). Respondents were asked to indicate, on the six-point Likert scale, the extent to which they would pay attention to the pragmatic aspects of English during any learning experience, as opposed to the grammatical aspects, in multiple contexts, either in or outside the classroom.

Cronbach's alpha was used to calculate the coefficients of internal consistency for the four components of the motivation scale. The coefficients were .85 for intrinsic motivation, .91 for identified motivation, .84 for introjected motivation, and .83 for external motivation. The internal consistency of the engagement scale was .90 (Sanjaya et al., 2022). These reliability estimates exceeded the minimum acceptable reliability coefficient of .70, demonstrating the internal consistency of the overall scales. After modifications, a pilot study was conducted using the test, and the reliability indexes were re-tested with 25 respondents from the same population. The results indicated equivalent reliability levels exceeding .80.

C. Procedure

This study employed a quantitative correlational design to investigate the potential influence of pragmatic motivation on pragmatic engagement among EFL learners at varying proficiency levels. Data collection occurred in three stages. First, an email invitation was sent to postgraduate English majors at Prince Sattam bin Abdelaziz University including a brief description of the study and a request for voluntary and confidential participation. Second, upon receiving consent, participants were scheduled for the Standardized Test of English Proficiency (STEP) and asked to answer open-ended questionnaires. In total, 135 minutes were allocated for the proficiency test and demographic survey. A pragmatic motivation and engagement questionnaire was also distributed online to 25 respondents from the same population via Google Forms as a part of a pilot study. These respondents were asked to evaluate the clarity and comprehension of the items. No issues regarding difficulty or ambiguity were reported. In the third stage, the demographic survey and the 34-item online questionnaire were distributed to all participants via Google Forms. The items and instructions were provided in English, and the researcher was available on WhatsApp for any inquiries. The questionnaire required approximately 10–15 minutes to complete.

Following an initial screening of the data, 198 respondents were selected for the study. Based on their test scores, they were divided into three proficiency groups: intermediate (n = 75), upper-intermediate (n = 75), and advanced (n = 48). The study excluded participants with elementary English proficiency, as it was considered inadequate for the purpose of the study.

D. Data Analysis

Data analyses were conducted using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS, version 25). Descriptive statistics, including means and standard deviations, were computed to describe the respondents' demographic information, proficiency levels, and responses to the 34 items on the questionnaire. The questionnaire items were coded on a six-point Likert scale, as follows: 1 = strongly disagree; 2 = disagree; 3 = slightly disagree; 4 = slightly agree; 5 = agree; 6 = strongly agree. Descriptive statistics were also calculated to report the level of motivation and degree of pragmatic engagement of EFL learners for each participant group. ANOVA tests were used to identify significant differences between groups at different proficiency levels regarding motivational dimensions and pragmatic engagement. Lastly, Pearson correlations were conducted to examine the relationship between the variables (pragmatic motivation and pragmatic engagement) across different proficiency groups. This allowed for the assessment of the predictive power of the two dimensions of motivation on pragmatic engagement.

IV. RESULTS

A. L2 Motivation and Pragmatic Engagement Across Proficiency Levels

Descriptive statistics were computed across all groups to address the first research question on whether different proficiency levels exhibit variations in their L2 motivation and pragmatic engagement. Table 2 presents several noteworthy aspects of the pragmatic motivation test. Participants with advanced proficiency demonstrated a relatively stronger sense of both autonomous and controlled motivations, scoring on average 77.5 and 52.70, respectively, compared to those in other proficiency levels. This means the average response to each item in the autonomous and controlled measures was 5.1 and 4.0, respectively (i.e., falling between 'agree' and 'slightly agree' on the coding scale).

This indicates that autonomous motivation was more prevalent than controlled motivation. In other words, when learning to use English politely and adequately within various contexts, learners are more motivated by internal rewards, such as interest and enjoyment, or fear of appearing incompetent, than by external rewards like career advancement and high grades.

TABLE 2
DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS OF L2 MOTIVATION ACROSS PROFICIENCY GROUPS

Proficiency groups	Pragmatic motivation	No.	Mean	Std.
Intermediate users	Autonomous	75	35.18	9.46
	Controlled	75	30.18	0.86
Upper-intermediate users	Autonomous	75	42.20	12.15
	Controlled	75	29.11	2.89
Advanced users	Autonomous	48	77.5	6.44
	Controlled	48	52.70	5.28

In the intermediate proficiency group, the means for autonomous and controlled motivations were relatively similar (35.18 and 30.18, respectively), indicating low motivation with no significant difference between the two dimensions. A similar trend was noted in the upper-intermediate proficiency group, which exhibited low levels of autonomous and controlled motivations (42.20 and 29.11, respectively), with a slight discrepancy between the two categories. By using the average score for each participant on the autonomous and controlled item measures, it was observed that most respondents scored less than 2.8 (i.e., between 'disagree' and 'strongly disagree' on the coding scale). Consequently, it can be inferred that intermediate and upper-intermediate EFL learners lacked the motivation to learn the pragmatic aspects of the target language, as reflected in their usage of English.

B. Pragmatic Engagement Across Proficiency Levels

The descriptive statistics for the pragmatic engagement test, as depicted in Table 3, reveal several noteworthy patterns among participants across the different proficiency groups. Users with advanced English proficiency demonstrated a relatively high level of pragmatic engagement, with an overall mean of 31.27, surpassing that of the other proficiency groups. On average, most respondents scored a value of 5.2 (i.e., between 'agree' and 'strongly agree' on the coding scale), which was marginally higher than the average value for the motivational dimensions. This suggests that these participants were frequently engaged in learning experiences that focused on using English politely.

TABLE 3
DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS OF PRAGMATIC ENGAGEMENT ACROSS PROFICIENCY GROUPS

	Proficiency groups	No.	Mean	Std.
Pragmatic Engagement	Intermediate users	75	15.90	1.02
	Upper-intermediate users	75	18.10	4.02
	Advanced users	48	31.27	3.38

In contrast, the level of pragmatic engagement among the intermediate and upper-intermediate users was relatively low. On average, intermediate users scored 2.6 (M = 15.90), and upper-intermediate users scored 3 (M = 18.10), which falls between 'disagree' and 'slightly agree' on the coding scale. This average score is slightly lower than the mean value for the motivational dimension, which was 2.8. It can be argued that the intermediate and upper-intermediate proficiency groups demonstrated little interest in or willingness to participate in learning tasks involving appropriate language use. Therefore, learning how to use English politely did not seem personally enriching or significant to these groups.

C. Differences Across Groups

To address the second research question, an ANOVA was conducted to identify potential differences among EFL learners across various proficiency groups in terms of pragmatic motivation quality and degree of pragmatic engagement. The calculations in Table 4 reveal notable differences between the three proficiency groups concerning their motivation to engage in learning experiences related to appropriate language use. Significant differences were detected among the groups in terms of their autonomous (F = 268.23, p < .000) and controlled motivation (F = 864.10, p < .000), as well as their willingness to engage in pragmatic learning activities (F = 429.98, p < .000). It can be argued, therefore, that the participants' English proficiency levels had a positive influence on their motivation and pragmatic engagement.

TABLE 4
ANOVA RESULTS OF L2 MOTIVATION AND PRAGMATIC ENGAGEMENT ACROSS PROFICIENCY GROUPS

Sub-scale	Source	SS	df	MS	F	Sig.
Autonomous Motivation	Between groups	53695.1903	2	26847.5952		
	Within groups	19517.1733	195	100.0881	268.23972	.00 0
	Total	73212.3636	197			
Controlled Motivation	Between groups	17604.8494	2	8802.4247		
	Within groups	1986.4233	195	10.1868	864.10222	.00 0
	Total	19591.2727	197			
Pragmatic Engagement	Between groups	8016.6164	2	4008.3082		
	Within groups	1817.7725	195	9.3219	429.98786	.00 0
	Total	9834.3889	197			

D. Correlation Between L2 Motivation and Pragmatic Engagement Across Proficiency Groups

A correlation analysis was conducted to determine potential associations between the L2 motivational dimensions and pragmatic engagement among EFL learners across varying proficiency groups. Overall, as depicted in Table 4, L2 motivation was significantly and positively correlated with pragmatic engagement, $p < .01$. Among the advanced learners, the correlation between autonomous motivation and engagement ($r = .96$) was substantially higher than that between controlled motivation and engagement ($r = .87$). The correlation between autonomous motivation and engagement ($r = .67$ and $.80$, respectively) among intermediate and upper-intermediate groups was considerably greater than that between controlled motivation and engagement ($r = .36$ and $.56$, respectively). These findings suggest that proficiency-mediated autonomous motivation can more effectively influence EFL learners' pragmatic engagement compared to controlled motivation. Due to proficiency and motivation, the advanced learners reported investing more time, effort, and energy on pragmatic learning in and outside the classroom. Correspondingly, the lower the learners' proficiency, the less likely they were to engage in pragmatic learning experiences involving appropriate language use. This conclusion arguably indicates that these two motivational regulations represent distinct motivational characteristics; therefore, the items included in each measure reflect two distinct motivational dimensions.

TABLE 5
CORRELATIONS BETWEEN MOTIVATION AND PRAGMATIC ENGAGEMENT ACROSS PROFICIENCY GROUPS

Proficiency level		Intermediate	Upper-intermediate	Advanced
Pragmatic Engagement	Autonomous motivation	0.679**	0.808**	0.967**
	Controlled motivation	0.36**	0.56**	0.879**

** $p < .01$

V. DISCUSSION

This study aimed to enrich the interlanguage pragmatics literature with evidence-based information on L2 motivation and pragmatic engagement across different proficiency levels. Initially, it investigated the quality of L2 motivational dimensions (autonomous and controlled) and the degree of pragmatic engagement among intermediate, upper-intermediate, and advanced EFL learners, demonstrating significant differences between groups. Subsequently, it utilized correlation analysis to determine the extent to which EFL learners' L2 motivation across different proficiency levels could predict their behavioral engagement in pragmatic learning. Lastly, it sought to emphasize the influence of proficiency on L2 motivation and pragmatic engagement in EFL contexts, and to understand how these factors interact as indicators of pragmatic engagement.

The major findings of this study confirmed that the L2 motivational dimensions associated with different English proficiency groups can significantly contribute to varying degrees of pragmatic engagement. This, as hypothesized, facilitates the pragmatic development of EFL learners. These conclusions align with those of Sanjaya et al. (2022), where a standard multiple linear regression demonstrated that both autonomous and controlled motivations significantly contributed to the variance in pragmatic engagement. The current study expands upon this previous work by providing empirical evidence of the interaction between proficiency and L2 motivation in pragmatic engagement. Compared to intermediate and upper-intermediate EFL learners, advanced learners exhibited greater L2 motivation across both motivational dimensions (autonomous and controlled), which in turn predicted behavioral engagement in pragmatic learning. This study also found that the positive influence of motivation on pragmatic engagement was mediated by individual factors such as proficiency level, enhancing their capacity to engage in pragmatics-related learning activities. This implies that high levels of English proficiency positively impact learners' motivation to participate in L2 pragmatic tasks involving appropriate language use. As proficiency and motivation increased, advanced EFL learners reported investing more time, effort, and energy in pragmatic learning both inside and outside the classroom.

Conversely, the intermediate and upper-intermediate EFL learners demonstrated a lack of motivation to learn the pragmatic aspects of the target language, specifically how to use English appropriately and politely. This negatively impacted their level of pragmatic engagement. Several factors might explain this. First, pragmatic competence is often undervalued in EFL contexts due to the status of English in foreign language environments (Ren et al., 2022). In the Saudi context, real-life communicative opportunities to use English outside the classroom are limited. Further, Saudi formal education often prioritizes the formal aspects (e.g., grammar) of English over the functional (i.e., pragmatics) aspects (Alrabai, 2016). Such experiences may lead to the perception that learning to use English properly is not worthwhile, as it is not required for everyday communication. As a result, motivation to learn English for functional purposes may decrease. Second, these findings support the common assumption that general proficiency is a prerequisite for L2 pragmatic competence, a notion documented across proficiency levels in various studies (e.g., Sağdıç, 2021; Ren et al., 2022). Thus, lower proficiency can inhibit EFL learners' ability to recognize the pragmatic aspects of the language in different contexts (for reviews, see Ren et al., 2022). Third, the prevalent belief that grammatical correctness is the primary indicator of proficiency in a second language may render pragmatics less appealing, especially for low-proficiency learners. According to Ren et al. (2022), low-proficiency groups often perceive pragmatic infelicities as less severe than grammatical errors compared to high-proficiency learners.

The study also disclosed that the intensity of engagement in pragmatic learning activities was associated with the quality of learners' motivation to learn English pragmatics. Statistically, a significant positive correlation emerged between both autonomous and controlled motivations and pragmatic engagement. This finding provides empirical support for the SDT framework, which asserts that motivational dimensions serve to "frame the quality of the learning experience and can differentially predict the intensity of engagement" (Noels et al., 2000, p. 823; Ryan & Deci, 2017).

A key finding was that autonomous motivation had a more significant positive effect on pragmatic engagement than controlled motivation among all proficiency groups. Specifically, high-proficiency learners showed a stronger correlation between autonomous motivation and pragmatic engagement than controlled motivation, suggesting that autonomous motivation had a greater impact on pragmatic engagement. Given the study's aims, this result implies that EFL learners with autonomous motivational regulations are more likely to engage actively in learning experiences focused on using English appropriately in diverse contexts compared to those guided by controlled motivational regulations. This supports the ideas of Chen and Kraklow (2015).

Therefore, EFL learners who find learning pragmatics enjoyable, entertaining, or personally meaningful may be more inclined to engage vigorously in learning activities than those who perceive it as primarily advantageous for economic purposes. EFL learners' perceptions of learning pragmatics influence L2 motivation and engagement, which could be due to pragmatics' reduced significance in foreign language contexts where English is not a daily means of communication and is limited to formal classroom settings. This result is especially significant because, to the best of the researcher's knowledge, it provides empirical evidence of how two motivational dimensions influence varying levels of behavioral engagement in L2 pragmatics across different proficiency groups and contextual settings. This finding aligns with Chen and Kraklow's (2015) report that controlled motivational regulations did not actively motivate EFL students to engage in English learning tasks.

VI. CONCLUSION

This study aimed to explore the relationship between L2 motivational dimensions (autonomous and controlled) and pragmatic engagement across different proficiency groups. It revealed significant differences in L2 motivation and pragmatic engagement across all proficiency groups. Additionally, all groups demonstrated a significant positive correlation between L2 motivation and pragmatic engagement, with both motivational dimensions making a significant contribution to pragmatic engagement. Compared to intermediate and upper-intermediate users, advanced proficiency EFL learners showed higher levels of motivation and engagement. In summary, motivation, as mediated by proficiency, played a crucial role in determining the extent of active engagement in pragmatic learning among EFL learners.

The study acknowledges several limitations, presenting potential areas for future research. Expanding the sample to encompass different nationalities, EFL learners, and educational contexts could yield varied results. The study was limited to female learners due to the researcher's residence in a gender-segregated society. Subsequent studies might examine the role of gender disparities in influencing various outcomes. There may be scope to examine EFL teachers' L2 motivation to engage in L2 pragmatic learning experiences, potentially providing critical insights into EFL teachers' professional development practices. Future inquiries could investigate the impact of L2 motivation on pragmatic engagement related to different target pragmatic features, offering insights into how various aspects of pragmatics are influenced by L2 motivation mediated by proficiency. Data from these studies could also highlight differences related to age and gender. Further research could explore the relationship between pragmatic engagement and learner-related factors such as gender, cognitive abilities, personality, identity, and attitude toward the target culture. This could clarify the factors that might mediate the effect of motivation on L2 pragmatic engagement. Investigations in this domain will also enhance our understanding of which parameters most significantly shape pragmatic performance.

In conclusion, this research contributes to the field of L2 pragmatics by enriching our understanding of this under-explored area, specifically how the two dimensions of motivation (autonomous and controlled), mediated by varying proficiency levels, interact as predictors of behavioral engagement in pragmatic learning. As a result, L2 pedagogy

should prioritize fostering EFL learners' autonomous and controlled motivational regulations to enhance their ability to engage in pragmatic learning experiences, particularly in contexts where English is not the medium of communication.

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