Motivation and autonomy in English language learning in higher education: Insights from Spanish Army students[*]

Motivació i autonomia en l'aprenentatge de la llengua inglesa en l'educació superior: percepció dels estudiants de l'exèrcit de terra

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Abstract: This article explores the role of motivation and autonomy in the learning outcomes of students from the Spanish Army in English Language courses at the university. The courses aim to improve both their communication skills and their knowledge of specialized language (English for Specific Purposes, ESP). Second- (n = 24) and third-year (n = 47) students participated in discussions using questionnaires and semi-structured interviews to conduct a needs analysis. The results reveal that students are more motivated when practicing skills relevant to their professional and communicative goals. The study emphasizes the need for resources to foster autonomy and improve learning outcomes in the military educational context.
Keywords: motivation; learner autonomy; English for Specific Purposes; needs analysis; military English.

Resum: Aquest article explora el paper de la motivació i l'autonomia en l'aprenentatge dels estudiants de l'Exèrcit de Terra espanyol en cursos de llengua anglesa a la universitat. Els cursos tenen com a objectiu millorar tant les habilitats comunicatives com els coneixements especialitzats d'idiomes (anglès per a fins específics). Estudiants de segon (n = 24) i tercer (n = 47) curs van participar en debats utilitzant qüestionaris i entrevistes semiestructurades per dur a terme una anàlisi de necessitats. Els resultats revelen que els estudiants estan més motivats

a l'hora de practicar habilitats rellevants per als seus objectius professionals. L'estudi ressalta la necessitat de recursos per fomentar l'autonomia i millorar els resultats d'aprenentatge en el context educatiu militar.

Paraules clau: motivació; autonomia de l'alumnat; anglès per a fins específics; anàlisi de necessitats; anglès militar.

1. Introduction

In an increasingly globalized world dominated by conflicts, command of the English language has become imperative for military personnel who participate in multinational operations and joint exercises to communicate with international allies. For members of the Spanish Army, proficiency in both General English (GE) and specialized military English is crucial to fulfill their duty and progress professionally (Miller & Crowther, 2020). Yet, despite the importance of language skills in the military, the role of motivation and autonomy in influencing the language learning progress of military students has received scant attention in the research literature, especially within the context of the Spanish Armed Forces.

In the field of ESP (English for Specific Purposes), motivation intensifies when students find a direct relation between the content of the ESP module and their professional goals (Brown, 2016). This motivation, both extrinsic and intrinsic, results in the effectiveness of autonomous learning strategies. While studies on autonomy and motivation in GE and ESP are plentiful (e.g., Jiménez Raya & Vieira, 2021; Benson & Voller, 2013; Murray, Gao & Lamb, 2011; Martín-González & Chaves-Yuste, 2024; Rubić & Matijević, 2019, to mention a few), ESP research applied to military education contexts is limited (but see García-Pinar, 2022; Martínez de Baños Carrillo & Guerin, 2008; Montalban-Ibañez, García-Pinar & Tello-Fons, 2023; Noguera Díaz, 2023; Rosca & Oria Gómez, 2019). This paper seeks to address this gap by examining how cadets of the Spanish Army at the Centro Universitario de la Defensa de Zaragoza perceive their motivation and autonomy in English language courses. This research has three main aims: (1) to analyse the motivational factors driving Spanish Army cadets to study English; (2) to identify the strategies used by these students to engage in autonomous learning; and (3) to explore potential ways to enhance its effectiveness.

This paper is divided as follows. Section 2 begins by laying out the current literature relevant to the study, such as the concepts of motivation and autonomous learning, as well as previous studies on English for the Mili-

tary. Section 3 introduces the context and participants, and presents the data and analysis methods used for this research. Then, Section 4 analyses the results of the different interviews performed with the students and discusses some potential areas for improvement. Lastly, the Conclusion addresses the research questions and discusses the most relevant findings.

2. Literature review

Motivation and autonomy are widely recognized as critical factors in second language acquisition (SLA). They are, in fact, deeply interconnected and mutually reinforcing: motivation drives learners to work autonomously, and autonomy, in turn, sustains and deepens motivation (Murray, Gao & Lamb, 2011).

The importance of autonomy in language education has been widely recognised. However, it remains a complex field of study that requires further exploration and practical implementation. Jiménez Raya and Vieira (2021: 4) draw attention to the marginal status that autonomy continues to occupy in educational contexts and emphasise the need for substantial changes in the structural conditions of teaching and learning to effectively foster autonomy. Benson and Voller (2013: 1) note that considerable uncertainty remains regarding the meanings and applications of concepts such as autonomy and independence, underscoring the need for clarification and interrogation of such concepts.

Learner autonomy, as defined by Henri Holec (1981: 3), is "the ability to take charge of one's own learning". For him, self-directed learning implies the learner's transition from a position of dependence to one of independence through a 'deconditioning' process—a break from preconceived notions of teacher-directed education—and the acquisition of the know-how needed to assume responsibility for learning (Holec, 1981: 22). Therefore, the objective of teaching must be not only to help the learner acquire linguistic and communicative abilities, but also to help them learn how to learn (Holec, 1981: 23).

Correspondingly, several authors have emphasized the importance of fostering learners' own motivation and sense of self-determination, instead of viewing motivation "as something that teachers "do" or "give" to learners through a variety of motivational tricks and strategies" (Ushioda, 2008: 28). The role of motivation in SLA has been extensively studied, starting from

Gardner and Lambert's (1959) pioneering work. Their highly influential model distinguishes between instrumental and integrative motivation (Gardner & Lambert, 1972). Instrumental motivation refers to learning a language for practical goals (e.g., employment, academic achievement), while integrative motivation involves a desire to integrate into the culture of the target language (Gardner & Lambert, 1972: 3).

These dimensions of motivation also align with the well-established distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, as articulated in Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985). According to this framework, autonomy, competence and interpersonal relatedness are essential for fostering motivation and psychological well-being. Intrinsic motivation, driven by the inherent satisfaction of the activity itself, is considered the most significant manifestation of the human tendency toward learning and creativity (Deci & Ryan, 1985, 2000; Silva et al., 2021).

More recent models, such as Dörnyei's L2 Motivational Self System (2005, 2009), conceptualize motivation through three dimensions: the Ideal L2 Self, the Ought-to L2 Self, and the L2 Learning Experience. The first two describe how individuals are motivated by visions of their future selves, while the third focuses on the immediate context of language learning. The Ideal Self reflects a learner's internal vision of who they aspire to be in terms of L2 proficiency. This includes both the desire to communicate with members of an L2 community (integrativeness) and the pursuit of success in academic or professional domains (promotional instrumentality) (Dörnyei, 2010). In contrast, the Ought-to Self is shaped by external expectations and the wish to avoid negative outcomes, and is more closely tied to prevention-focused instrumentality, such as studying not to fail an exam (Dörnyei, 2005, 2010). Finally, the Learning Experience refers to situation-specific motives tied to the immediate learning environment and experience (Dörnyei, 2005).

Dörnyei's model (2005, 2009) has also been applied to explore motivation in ESP learning. Most recently, Martín-González and Chaves-Yuste (2024) conducted a comparative study of motivational variables, including L2 motivational self-system variables, among ESP and GE students. Miller and Crowther's (2020) study on Foreign Language Learning (FLL) at a U.S. military academy offers one of the few examinations of the relationship between L2 motivation and military-specific considerations. Using Dörnyei's model, they identify differences in how the learning environment influenced which motivational elements the cadets accessed when constructing their ideal selves. However, such studies are rare, and there is a clear need for further

research on how motivation- and autonomy-related variables function within the specific constraints and opportunities of military ESP education.

Research on ESP within the Spanish military educational context remains equally scarce. These studies have primarily focused on enhancing productive language skills, such as oral communication (García-Pinar, 2022) and written expression (Montalban-Ibañez, García-Pinar & Tello-Fons, 2023), whereas other researchers have proposed methodological innovations in the classroom (Martínez de Baños Carrillo & Guerin, 2008; Noguera Díaz, 2023; Rosca & Oria Gómez, 2019), with only two of these studies specifically addressing the context of the Spanish Army. Nevertheless, none of these studies has examined how learner autonomy and motivation impact students' language learning outcomes in this specific context, which highlights a significant gap in the literature. Consequently, the research questions that guided this study are the following:

> RQ1: What is the Spanish Army students' motivation for studying English? What are their expectations regarding the subject?

> RQ2: What are the key strategies employed by Army students to engage in autonomous learning?

> RQ3: What potential improvements can be made based on the limitations presented by students?

3. Methodology

3.1 Context and Participants

Spanish Army cadets can access the General Corps of the Army (*Cuerpo General del Ejército de Tierra*, CGET) by undertaking university entrance exams after completing high school, or through specific tests if they have prior military experience (i.e., non-commissioned officers and enlisted personnel). Upon admission, they are automatically enrolled in a university degree at the Universidad de Zaragoza. While cadets also take military lessons and training in the Academia General Militar (AGM), the Centro Universitario de la Defensa (CUD) in Zaragoza provides teaching for the university degree.

Since 2009, cadets have been enrolled in the Bachelor's Degree in Industrial Organisation Engineering. Nevertheless, starting the 2024/2025 academic year, the Spanish Army introduced a new educational curriculum for incoming cadets. This new degree, the Bachelor's Degree in Defense and Se-

curity Studies, provides more specialized technological and humanistic train-ing for the Spanish Army's future officers. Both degree programs will coexist until the end of the 2027/2028 academic year.

In both Bachelor's Degree programs, the English Language modules (6 ECTS each) are distributed across the four academic years: English Language I (first year), English Language II (second year), English Language III (third year) and English Language IV (fourth year). In the Degree in Industrial Or-ganisation Engineering, the first three modules aim to consolidate a B2 level according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), which corresponds to an SLP (Standardized Language Profile) 2.2.2.2 level under NATO's STANAG 6001[1]. English Language IV aims to progress students toward a B2+ level. In contrast, while English Language I and II in the Degree in Defense and Security Studies maintain the same objectives, English Language III and IV aim to reach a C1 in the CEFR, which equals an SLP 3.3.3.3 level of STANAG 6001.

Under the old curriculum, English Language II and IV were taught during the first semester, while English Language I and III were taught in the sec-ond semester. This resulted in first- and third-year students not studying or practicing the language for more than a year. With the new degree, English courses are now taught annually, although there remains a six-month gap between modules.

Aligned with the objectives of this research, participants in this study were second-year officer cadets in the 2023/2024 academic year and third-year second-lieutenant cadets[2] in the 2024/2025 academic year. Students from both samples were enrolled in the Bachelor's Degree in Industrial Organi-sation Engineering, meaning they went more than a year without studying English at the university during the period of data collection. Participants volunteered to participate in the study, and their privacy was respected by ensuring anonymity.

Regarding second-year students, a total of 24 participants enrolled in the subject 'English Language II' during the 2023/2024 academic year were se-

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[1] This framework refers to the Standardization Agreement for language proficiency across NATO member countries. These language certificates are required for professional develop-ment, as well as for specific positions or deployments to ensure clear communication between allied and multinational forces.
[2] Cadets are commissioned as second-lieutenants in their third year. This means that both samples were drawn from the same cadre of students.

lected based on the following criteria: a) they were members of the CGET[3]; b) they were not selected to participate in any exchange programs during the following academic year; and c) they had achieved a final grade higher than 6 out of 10 in the subject. Within this sample, five students were prior service soldier, meaning they undertook specific promotion exams to qualify for the rank of officer.

On the other hand, a total of 47 third-year volunteers enrolled in the subject 'English Language III' during the 2024/2025 academic year completed the survey anonymously. To protect their identities, explicit questions about their entrance exams or previous experience in the army were not included. Since the survey was distributed a year later, it is possible that some participants participated in the interviews carried out in the previous academic year. Nevertheless, as the survey was anonymous, it is not possible to verify their prior participation or determine the academic profile of any of the participants.

3.2 *Data collection and analysis*

To address the research questions, a needs analysis was performed to assess the present situation and the (perceived) target situation of students, as well as the language and linguistic needs that influence their motivation and learning process both inside and outside the classroom (Brown, 2016; Flowerdew, 2010; Richards & Schmidt, 2010). In the context of ESP, a needs analysis is a key tool that facilitates the creation of a learner profile to foster their learning efficiency and motivation. It is important to mention that this paper does not seek to present a modification of the existing curriculum, but rather aims to enhance students' self-directed learning and motivation. In fact, students' motivations, attitudes and preferred teaching and learning styles greatly influence the outcome of a general needs analysis (Brown, 2016: 50).

To gather the necessary data to examine the specific needs of army cadets, two different tools were employed. On the one hand, individual semi-structured interviews were conducted with those students who were not enrolled in an English module at university at that time to gain deeper insight into their

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[3] A small percentage of students enrolled in the Civil Guard Corps (*Guardia Civil*) complete their first and second years of training at the AGM and, therefore, study at the CUD. They then continue their education at a different academy and university.

learning situation without classes (see subsection 3.2.1). On the other hand, a survey was distributed among the same cadre of students approximately a year later during the period studying an English module (see subsection 3.2.2). The aim was to collect a broader amount of information about their study patterns to assess their motivational factors and autonomous learning.

3.2.1 Interview data

Students engaged in semi-structured interviews to reflect on their learning experiences. The interview was designed to gather data on their motivation to learn English, autonomous learning and specific learning needs (see Appendix I). Although there were pre-set questions and topics, the semi-structured format of the interview allowed flexibility to discuss and reflect on issues raised by the students. Interviews were conducted face-to-face and individually, engaging one student at a time while ensuring that the same topics were addressed across all interviews. Additionally, they were recorded, with the students' consent, to ensure accuracy in data collection and transcription.

The first part of the interview comprised questions about participants' educational background (questions 1 and 2), language skills (questions 3, 4, 5 and 6), and university experience (questions 7, 8 and 9). The final part focused on their motivation and capacity for autonomous learning (questions 10 to 23).

After transcribing the interviews (n = 43,477 words), the data were analyzed by drawing on a thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis is an interdisciplinary method employed by linguists and discourse analysts, among others, to identify, analyze and report patterns in qualitative data. To do so, the analysis of the interviews involved a detailed, qualitative reading of the students' participation to identify and organize themes relevant to the research questions. Although some responses were considered to belong to more than one theme, they were assigned to the most salient category, following the independent analyses carried out by the two researchers and after comparing the findings.

3.2.2 Survey data

A survey was given to third-year second-lieutenant cadets to analyze their needs, motivation and autonomous learning (see Appendix II). Using Google Forms, the survey gathered responses concerning their language background

and experience learning English throughout their education. A large number of questions were closed and quantified (61.54% of the total). In addition, some questions required short answers so that students could justify some of the closed-ended questions (38.46% of questions). To examine the latter set of qualitative questions, keywords were manually identified to group them into thematic categories (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

As can be seen in Appendix II, the survey was divided into three parts. The first section (previous experience with the language) consisted of basic questions about their educational background before their enrolment at the AGM. The second set of questions was related to their language learning experience at university (English at university). Students were asked about their most and least favourite activities, as well as those skills they find most challenging. This part also asked them to assess the impact of the period without English classes on their fluency and overall proficiency in English. Lastly, the third section explored their motivation and autonomous learning. This part included the largest number of open-ended questions so that cadets could elaborate on their motivation and language learning needs, as well as discuss their study habits.

4. Results and discussion

4.1 *Interviews with second-year students*

Five main themes were identified after the qualitative reading: background, predisposition, autonomous learning, motivation and limitations. 'Background' referred to where and how participants learned English and whether they had obtained language certifications. 'Predisposition' concerned their attitudes toward English. 'Autonomous learning' included comments in which students engaged in independent study time. 'Motivation' emerged as intrinsic and extrinsic, related to academic or professional aspirations. Finally, 'limitations' highlighted the challenges they faced, such as difficulties and time constraints.

4.1.1 Background

Participants in the study were asked about their English learning backgrounds. Most had studied the language at school (23 participants) or taken

extracurricular courses (19), while a smaller number reported having learned English through exchange programmes (3) or autonomous study (5).

Regarding their certified level of English, seven students held a B2 certificate, five a C1, and another five a B1. Five prior service students had obtained an SLP 2.2.2.2 certification. Lastly, four participants reported that they did not possess any official certification.

4.1.2 Predisposition

A generally positive predisposition towards English emerged across the interviews. Most students stated that they like English, especially because it allows them to interact with other cultures. In some cases, students' favourable attitude was linked to their personal interests and hobbies. For example, several mentioned that they enjoy listening to music in English and prefer watching TV series and movies in the original language rather than dubbed versions (see example 1). In fact, they also mentioned these hobbies as a way of learning the language passively (see subsection 4.1.3).

> 1) Me gusta escuchar música en inglés, o películas en inglés. No me gustan dobladas. [...] (Lo hago) por placer. Aunque también puedo aprender con los subtítulos. (*I enjoy listening to music in English and watching movies in English too. I don't like them dubbed [...] (I do it) for fun. Although I can also learn from the subtitles.*)

Only three participants affirmed that they did not like studying the language, but two of them acknowledged its importance and usefulness for communication in a globalized world, while the third person attributed their dislike to difficulties with studying it.

Overall, the majority of participants underlined the importance of English for their future career in the Army. While many brought it up when describing their attitude towards English, some did not mention this until explicitly asked about the relevance of the language to their profession. This suggests that some students present a potential lack of awareness regarding the importance and necessity of achieving fluency in the language for their military career, as it was later mentioned by other participants (see subsection 4.1.6).

In short, the results revealed a generally positive attitude towards English among students, often linked to personal interests, showing a strong predisposition to learn and improve their language skills.

4.1.3 Autonomous learning

The most common autonomous learning practices among participants were watching films and TV series and listening to music in English, although not all of them were fully aware that these activities constitute a passive form of language learning until brought up by the researchers, as mentioned in sub-section 4.1.2. Similarly, many students reported consuming online content in English, such as videos or social media posts, on platforms like YouTube or Instagram.

As mentioned above, a significant number of participants engaged with these audiovisual products in English due to their personal preferences or habits, rather than to improve their language skills. However, some students reported a more active approach with these materials, such as looking up unfamiliar words they find in films, series or song lyrics.

When asked about their self-learning habits, participants described relying on more traditional study methods, such as reviewing and organising class notes, studying set phrases for oral and written expression (e.g., essay transitions, formal letter openings or the structure of an oral presentation), and practicing with previous oral and reading comprehension tests available on Moodle. Interestingly, some participants also reported using mobile applications such as Duolingo to practice not only English but also other languages, which are often only available with English translations. In addition, a few mentioned using AI tools such as ChatGPT to request feedback or corrections for their written expression practice. This points to a preference for passive and traditional study strategies over more active approaches.

Significantly, most participants acknowledged that they could improve their autonomous work. This perception was often linked to a range of limiting factors that impacted students' learning habits. As discussed below, these included both structural and personal barriers. In fact, some participants struggled to identify effective ways to improve their autonomous work.

4.1.4 Limitations

The interviews revealed several limitations that hinder students' language learning. While most comments were made in response to the question *"What challenges do you face when practicing English outside the classroom?"*, this theme emerged at various points during the interviews. These comments can

be broadly divided into two categories: those addressing challenges with language use and those referring to limitations to language learning.

Regarding language use, one of the most common challenges among participants was the limited exposure to communicative situations. Particularly, they emphasized the lack of opportunities to practice oral communication. With regard to that, many commented positively on initiatives and activities that encourage them to speak the language[4]. However, some of them reported difficulties participating regularly, citing time and schedule constraints. Another challenge faced by many of the participants was the lack of knowledge and/or confidence, especially when expressing themselves orally (see examples 2 and 3):

2) Falta de conocimiento, sobre todo. [...] cuando llegas a una conversación abierta en la que la conversación puede ir a cualquier sitio, llegan muchos momentos en los que me atasco porque el vocabulario no lo sé, o no me sale, o no tengo la suficiente gramática para [expresarme]... (*Lack of knowledge, above all. [...] when you get to an open conversation in which conversation can go in any direction, there are many moments when I get stuck because I don't know the words or they don't come to mind, or I don't know enough grammar to [express myself] ...)*

3) De primeras no me da vergüenza [hablar], pero a la segunda vez que no me entienden, ya me empiezo a poner nervioso y dejo de hablar. (*At first, I'm not ashamed [to speak], but the second time I'm not understood, I start to get nervous and I stop talking.)*

As to the factors limiting language learning opportunities and engagement, limited time for practice and study was one of the most frequently mentioned across interviews. Participants referred specifically to the demanding schedule and academic curriculum of their training programme. However, the study revealed that the students' perception that their autonomous English learning could be improved was not solely due to a lack of time. In many cases, it stemmed from their prioritisation of other subjects or tasks they considered more demanding over studying or practicing English (see example 4).

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[4] For instance, CUD English lecturers and AGM English instructors organize English conversation meetups, where students can engage in casual conversation with fellow classmates and exchange students from the US Military Academy at West Point.

4) No falta motivación, sino que es el hecho de que las otras asignaturas son más complicadas, y preferimos estudiarla [Lengua Inglesa] en una tarde y abandonarla un poco más, y dedicarles más tiempo a las asignaturas más complicadas. (*It's not that we aren't motivated, it's just that the other subjects are harder, so we'd rather study [English Language] in a single afternoon and then leave it aside, and spend more time on the tougher ones.*)

In line with this, it was possible to identify two other sub-themes within the 'limitations' theme. The first one was the absence of immediate, extrinsic motivators such as official language certification exams. For instance, some students highlighted a general uncertainty and limited understanding of the SLP exams and certifications, which are key for deployments and promotion in the Spanish Army (see example 5).

5) Yo creo que hay falta de información sobre cómo conseguirlos [los certificados SLP] o qué beneficios te van a dar en el futuro [...] Igual la gente se motivaría más a estudiar inglés [...] Necesitamos un poco más de información sobre cómo nos afecta [el inglés] en nuestra vida profesional. (*I think there's a lack of information about how to get them [the SLP certificates] or what benefits they bring in the future [...] Maybe people would be more motivated to study English [...] We need a bit more information on how English can impact our professional lives.*)

The second one was the struggle of some participants to identify areas for improvement, largely due to their prior education and existing knowledge. They mentioned feeling stuck and unsure of how to make progress or refine their language skills (see example 6). As a result, they felt disconnected from the lessons and lacked the motivation to work independently.

6) Me da que siempre estoy repitiendo lo mismo cuando lo estudio [...] Me he quedado ahí estancado en estos niveles y el siguiente paso no lo doy. (*I feel like I'm always repeating the same things when I study it* [...] *I'm stuck at this level and I'm not taking the next step.*)

These results reveal that students face different barriers that hinder their learning process, which often leads to a sense of frustration and insecurity. In addition, other challenges such as the existence of a demanding educational curriculum and military training and clear goals affected their motivation and willingness to engage in self-directed learning.

4.1.5 Motivation

Many participants perceived the relevance of English for their future in the military as a key motivational factor. Most of these students referred to the necessity of being fluent in the language to interact with international forces, be deployed, or participate in joint operations (see example 7). However, although some students expressed their interest in the language, those who previously mentioned little enthusiasm for studying it recognized its importance for professional development, thus becoming an extrinsic motivational factor (see example 8). Consequently, students not only perceived English as an academic subject but also as an important skill impacting their career advancement, and expressed commitment to improving their skills.

7) La posibilidad que te da cuando vas por ahí (de misión), y al fin y al cabo es uno de los idiomas más importantes que hay en general, y más estando en la OTAN, para comunicarte con la mayoría de los países [...] yo no lo veo como una asignatura, o como una obligación [...] sino como algo más de tu vida. (*The opportunities it gives you when you're deployed, and after all, it's one of the most important languages in general, especially within NATO, to communicate with most countries [...] I don't see it as a subject or obligation [...] but as something that's part of your life.*)

8) No me gusta mucho el inglés, pero viendo la profesión que tenemos y la importancia que tiene, le echo ganas [...] quiero tener el mejor nivel de inglés posible para mi futuro. (*I don't like English very much, but given the job we have and how important it is, I try hard [...] I want to have the best English I can for my future.*)

A second source of motivation included leisure activities, such as travelling and interacting with people from other cultures. Travel emerged as an intrinsic motivational factor for many students, as they expressed their desire to communicate fluently while abroad and to connect with people from different backgrounds (see example 9).

9) [Quiero] ir a otro país y saber comunicarme con la gente sin ningún tipo de problema. Que me digan algo y entenderlo. Quiero tener esa fluidez para hacer todo lo que quiera. (*[I want to] go to another country and be able to communicate with people without any kind of problem. Having someone say something to me and being able to understand it. I want to have that type of fluency to do whatever I want.*)

In line with this, spontaneous and informal interaction with foreign peers, such as visiting cadets from foreign military institutions, was frequently described as stimulating and as a positive incentive to use and improve their communication skills. Similarly, several participants suggested interactive activities conducted outside the formal classroom setting, such as movie screenings, field trips, or group outings, as initiatives to increase their motivation to learn and practice English. In sum, communicative and interactive activities were identified as key sources of motivation.

4.2 *Survey responses from third-year students*

4.2.1 General information about students and their learning experience

The results revealed that the vast majority of participants (43 out of 47, 91.5% of the total) marked primary and secondary school as their main context for learning English. In addition, 31 students (66%) considered language academies and similar institutions as their secondary learning environments. Only 12 students (25.5%) attributed their language learning experience to exchange programs or extended stays abroad. Although less frequent, two participants selected the "other" box to choose the Internet, especially YouTube, as an alternative source of English language learning.

The survey also reported that 35 students (74.5%) hold official language certificates, while the remaining 12 participants (25.5%) do not. Among those with a certificate, 15 students (31.9%) reported having a B1 level, another 14 (29.8%) hold the B2 level, and only two (4.3%) indicated possessing a C1 level certificate. Additionally, four participants (8.5%) stated they hold the SLP 2.2.2.2 certification.

Participants also assessed their current learning experience (questions 4 to 10). Students were asked to reflect on their most and least enjoyed class activities. In question 4 (see Appendix II), 32 replies referred to activities aimed at improving their speaking skills, such as engaging in discussions or debates with classmates or the teacher. Moreover, eight students also expressed their preference for passive learning activities, such as watching movies.

In contrast, question 5 highlighted a general dislike for writing, listening and reading activities. This points to greater motivation in learning when engaging in communicative and interactive activities rather than working independently.

Related to the latter question, nearly half of the participants (24, 51.1%) considered listening to be the most challenging skill, followed by speaking (22, 46.8%) and writing (17, 36.2%). Although it seems that speaking activities are well-perceived by participants, the reported dislike for reading and writing activities suggests a correlation between perceived learning difficulties and decreased motivation.

Question 8 revealed that the opinions of participants were nearly evenly divided, with 48.9% of students (23) considering the teaching schedule sufficient and 51.1% (24) considering the existing hours not enough. This division suggests that, although the schedule might be suitable for some, there is a significant number of students who need more class hours to meet their learning needs. Nevertheless, 59.6% of participants (28) stated that the period without English classes between the modules 'English Language II' and 'English Language III' affected them negatively. These were justified by a loss of language skills, such as oral skills (example 10), which supports the results obtained in question 6. Moreover, many students also emphasized the necessity of having English classes more frequently, and even transforming the subject into an annual module, as it has already been implemented in the new degree (examples 11 and 12).

> 10) We spend a lot of time without english (*sic*) and this affects in (*sic*) my listening and speaking skills.
>
> 11) Almost a year without studying english (*sic*) and then all again, it's like not running (*sic*) in a year and suddenly start (*sic*) running 10km. Bad idea.
>
> 12) I think english (*sic*) should be a full-term subject, it should be taught all the year.

Regarding those students who marked the options "it has not affected me" and "positively", it can be noticed that they selected them interchangeably. The responses hinted at motivation and autonomous learning, which helped them maintain, and even improve, their English level at that time (see examples 13 and 14).

> 13) I always try to keep up the work, I like to watch films in (*sic*) O.V. and also enjoy reading newspapers and practicing speaking with my partner.
>
> 14) I have kept practicing it by reading or listening (*sic*) different content on the Internet.

This part of the survey suggests that students perceive the scheduling of English classes as inadequate to support their language learning needs, as many students highlighted the detrimental effects of the extended gaps between the English Language modules. However, a smaller group displayed autonomy in maintaining and enhancing their language skills during these breaks.

4.2.2 Autonomous learning and motivation

The survey showed that 37 students (78.7%) do some activity to keep practicing the language, the most common being listening to music (33, 70.2%) and watching movies or TV series (31, 66%). Other activities include using multimedia platforms (15, 31.9%), playing videogames (13, 27.7%), reading texts in English (12, 25.5%), listening to podcasts (10, 21.3%) and traveling (10, 21.3%).

Results regarding the challenges that students face when practicing English outside the classroom coincided largely with those of the interviews. The most common challenge, selected by 57.4% of participants (27), was a lack of time. This was followed by the lack of knowledge and/or confidence (16, 34%) and shyness (12, 25.5%). Only seven participants (14.9%) marked disinterest, and five (10.6%) chose limited access to materials and/or resources.

As to the resources to study and/or practice English outside the classroom, 76.6% of the participants reported having the necessary materials to prepare for exams, while 23.4% felt these resources were insufficient. According to them, the skills that required more resources than those currently available for out-of-class practice were primarily oral comprehension (13 respondents), followed by oral expression (9), and, to a lesser extent, written expression (6) and written comprehension (4). Interestingly, some respondents who considered they were given the necessary resources to study for exams still identified areas where additional materials would be helpful. This suggests that, although they generally consider the available resources sufficient for exam preparation, they do not necessarily find them adequate for broader language development or recognize the need for more resources in certain skill areas. These results contrast with the findings from the semi-structured interviews, in which participants pointed to oral communication as the skill that lacks sufficient resources rather than listening comprehension. Finally, questions 16 and 17 revealed that most students (40) have used new technologies to

learn English, such as online translators (33), online dictionaries (28), websites (26), digital platforms (17), and AI tools (15).

Furthermore, the survey results indicate a strong consensus among participants (87.2%) that they could improve their autonomous learning. Question 21 allowed them to elaborate on how they felt that they could improve their autonomous learning. Among the responses, reading books and watching films and series in English are the most repeated, along with answers that mention devoting more time to learning or practicing English. Several participants mentioned speaking the language with natives or ESL speakers as a way to improve their language skills outside the classroom.

Regarding motivation, the survey revealed that there is a broad awareness of the importance of English for their education and future, with 97.9% of affirmative answers (46). Participants expressed their ideas on how to increase their motivation to practice and/or use English in their free time. A significant number of students proposed actions that had to do with their university studies and English lecturers, such as giving them material for autonomous practice, introducing them to topics that spark their interest, or encouraging them to read, listen to, and express themselves in English. Additionally, six responses pointed to a lack of time to devote to language learning, as previously reported in the semi-structured interviews.

Furthermore, seven students suggested that their motivation would be greater if they felt the need to use the language (see example 15). Similarly, three respondents emphasized the importance of English for their future career as a factor that increases motivation (see example 16).

15) Being pushed to a situation in which I need to use English language (*sic*).

16) Haciendo entender su importancia futura, personalmente ya tengo esa motivación, pero solo me falta tiempo. (*By making people aware of its future importance, personally I already have this motivation, but I just lack the time.*)

Additionally, interaction with the language (i.e., travelling, exchanges, opportunities for spoken communication, preferably with foreigners) was mentioned by seven participants in connection with motivation. Notably, six participants admitted to not knowing how to increase motivation. This could be aligned with the results of the semi-structured interviews, in which some students reported a lack of motivation due to their inability to identify specific areas for improvement and sensed that their learning was not progressing.

4.3 *Opportunities for improvement*

The previous subsections illustrate that students show preference for communicative activities in language learning contexts, which indicates a desire for practical usage of the language. However, the broader issue seems to be their uncertainty to independently enhance their language skills. Therefore, this subsection presents a series of strategic actions to address these situations as well as to foster motivation inside and outside the classroom to promote self-directed learning. Some potential improvements are listed as follows:

1. Raising awareness of effective autonomous strategies. Students should be guided to transform passive activities into active learning experiences.

2. Informing learners about available online resources. With the emergence of AI and other digital tools, students can make use of writing assistants, speech recognition tools and interactive platforms to practice writing and speaking independently, as well as to correct their own productions.

3. Bringing military personnel with deployment experience to tell them about the benefits of learning the language. Their experience would target the Ought-to L2 Self dimension of motivation by underscoring the practical benefits of language proficiency during goal-oriented contexts.

4. Increasing speaking-focused activities outside the classroom. This would involve creating opportunities beyond the classroom context, such as forming language clubs or discussion groups, or connecting with potential online conversation partners. This would provide students with the opportunity to practice in real-life situations.

5. Implementing gamification. This strategy would address their fragmented study time while addressing their intrinsic motivation through interactive and contextually relevant activities. These could include micro-lessons (e.g., mobile-friendly games and quizzes), military scenarios (e.g., designing activities that simulate professional situations), or problem-solving tasks or escape rooms to take advantage of their interest in collaborative activities, while simultaneously developing skills such as listening and reading and fostering teamwork and competitive motivation (Gruber & Faßbender, 2025).

Overall, addressing the challenges faced by university Army students requires a multifaceted approach that integrates technological resources, awareness and motivational elements, and innovative teaching techniques. The proposed strategies could foster and facilitate more effective self-directed language learning to succeed in both work and personal contexts.

5. Conclusion

This present research aimed to examine the role and impact of motivation and autonomy in the learning outcomes of students of the Spanish Army in English Language courses at the university. To do so, a series of semi-structured interviews and a survey were conducted with second and third-year cadets to identify their experiences and attitudes toward the language and their autonomous learning, as well as to assess how these factors influenced their academic performance and language proficiency.

Findings from the interviews and surveys largely coincide, pointing to similar perceptions among participants regarding their learning experiences. Despite the overall consistency between interview and survey data, certain discrepancies emerged. Firstly, second-year students considered oral expression skills to be the most challenging, while third-year students found oral comprehension harder. Secondly, new technologies and online resources such as AI tools and ESL webpages were more commonly used by third-year participants, whereas second-year participants tended to rely more on traditional study methods.

The study revealed that students' motivation to study and practice English was primarily driven by three main factors: the relevance of the language for their future military careers; the desire to travel and communicate effectively with non-Spanish speakers; and extrinsic motivators such as imminent or anticipated needs to use English (e.g., language certification exams, university tests and assignments, exchanges, etc.). These results can be interpreted through the lens of Dörnyei's L2 Motivational Self System (2005, 2009). On the one hand, the first two of these factors are connected to the Ideal L2 Self, highlighting its central role in learners' motivation. The first one reflects promotional instrumentality, in which language learning is tied to long-term goals of professional success and career advancement. The second one points to integrativeness, grounded in the desire to communicate with members of an L2 community. On the other hand, the references to extrinsic motiva-

tors indicate the also significant influence of the Ought-to L2 Self in English learning. To complete the examination of Spanish Army students' motivation, findings further indicate that students are more motivated when language learning involves communicative and interactive activities.

While participants in both the interviews and the surveys were strongly motivated by the belief that English would benefit their military careers, they appeared to lack a more detailed knowledge of its actual relevance. They generally acknowledged the importance of the English language in a globalized world, yet few demonstrated familiarity with specific ways language proficiency impacts professional opportunities. To support more informed learning, students would benefit from clearer and more detailed information on career-related uses of English and official language certification (SLP).

Regarding autonomy, the study showed that most students felt dissatisfied, insecure and, in some cases, frustrated with their autonomous learning. The data pointed to a deficiency in the amount of time devoted to language learning, which participants attributed to time and schedule constraints tied to their academic curriculum and training programme. Additionally, a significant number of participants reported a lack of knowledge and confidence that hindered their attempts at practicing oral communication. Moreover, findings revealed that, to a large extent, students' insecurity also stemmed from not knowing how to make progress. Some relied heavily on their existing knowledge, which often limited their efforts and negatively impacted their motivation, while others relied on the support provided by instructors' guidance and regular scheduling of classes in a more structured setting, which they preferred over independent study.

Therefore, as a result of the needs analysis conducted in this study, it is possible to identify a need for guidance to support their autonomous learning, for instance, by helping them identify areas for improvement or setting clearer and more advanced learning goals. As to autonomous learning practices, for example, raising their awareness of how to effectively use passive learning methods would enable them to get the most out of them.

While this paper fills a gap in the ESP literature and provides insights into the motivation and autonomy of Spanish Army students, the study is not without limitations. The sample size was limited to the same cadre of students, so the generalizability to the rest of the Spanish Army students or broader military educational contexts is also subject to certain limitations. Future research could incorporate a larger and more diverse sample of students, as well as longitudinal data to examine how these factors might change over

time to obtain a more comprehensive understanding of language (self)learning and motivation in military contexts.

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Appendix I (Interviews)

1. How and where have you learned English?
2. Do you have any official language certificates?
3. What is your attitude toward the language?
4. What are your strengths in the language?
5. What are your weaknesses?
6. Would you like to improve your language skills? What motivates you to do so?
7. Do you think English is important for your future?
8. What activities do you enjoy doing in class?
9. What activities do you not enjoy doing in class?
10. What activities or practices proposed by English language teachers have been the most helpful to you?
11. Do you use the language in any other context regularly?
12. Do you usually do any activity to stay in contact with the language?
13. What challenges do you face when trying to practice English outside the class-room? (e.g., shyness, lack of interest, time, knowledge or confidence, limited access to materials/resources, etc.)
14. How do you study the language in your daily life?
15. How much time do you dedicate to studying/practicing for the exams?
16. Do you feel you have the necessary resources to study/practice for exams? What skill do you think needs more materials than those currently available on Moodle?
17. Have you used new technologies to learn English? Which ones and how?
18. In this semester, without English classes, are you practicing it in any way?
19. How do you think you could improve your autonomous learning?
20. How do you think your motivation could be increased so that you would practice and/or use the English Language in your free time?
21. Is there anything else you would like to add?

Appendix II (Survey)

Previous Experience with the Language
1. How and where did you learn English? You can check more than one box.
    a) Primary and secondary school
    b) Language academies or similar institutions
    c) Exchanges and stays abroad
    d) Other
2. Do you have any official language certificates?
    a) Yes

  b)   No
3. If so, indicate which one
    (Open-ended)

English at University

4. What activities do you enjoy doing in class? (Open-ended)
5. What activities do you not enjoy doing in class? (Open-ended)
6. Which skill do you find the most difficult? (You can check more than one box)
    a)   Listening
    b)   Reading
    c)   Writing
    d)   Speaking
7. Justify your answer to the previous question. (Open-ended)
8. Do you think the current English class hours meet your learning needs?
    a)   Yes
    b)   No
9. How do you think the period without English classes (since English Language II)
    at the university has influenced your learning progress?
    a)   Positively
    b)   Negatively
    c)   It hasn't affected me
10. Justify your answer. (Open-ended)

Motivation and Autonomous Learning

11. Do you usually do any activity to keep practicing the language?
    a)   Yes
    b)   No
12. If you answered "Yes", indicate which ones. (You can check more than one box)
    a)   Movies and series
    b)   Music
    c)   Podcasts
    d)   Digital platforms (YouTube, Twitch, etc.)
    e)   Reading (books, press, etc.)
    f)   Language exchange (oral or written conversation)
    g)   Video games
    h)   Travel
    i)   Other
13. What challenges do you face when practicing English outside the classroom?
    (You can check more than one box)
    a)   Embarrassment

    b)   Lack of interest

    c)   Lack of time

    d)   Lack of knowledge or confidence

    e)   Limited access to materials and/or resources

    f)   Other

14. Do you think English is important for your education and future?

    a)   Yes

    b)   No

15. How much time do you dedicate to autonomous language study per week?

    a)   I don't study

    b)   30 min - 1 hour

    c)   Up to 2 hours

    d)   More than 2 hours

16. Do you think you have the necessary resources to study/practice for exams?

    a)   Yes

    b)   No

17. Which skill do you think needs more additional materials to practice outside the classroom? *(If you answered "No" to the previous question)*

    a)   Listening

    b)   Reading

    c)   Writing

    d)   Speaking

18. Have you used new technologies to learn English?

    a)   Yes

    b)   No

19. Which ones and how? (You can check more than one box)

    a)   I haven't used them

    b)   Artificial Intelligence

    c)   Online translators

    d)   Online dictionaries

    e)   Websites

    f)   Digital platforms

    g)   Other

20. Do you think you can improve your autonomous learning?

    a)   Yes

    b)   No

21. How do you think you could improve your autonomous learning? (Open-ended)

22. How do you think your motivation could be increased so that you would practice and/or use the English Language in your free time? (Open-ended)

23. Is there anything else you would like to add? (Open-ended)