

*Article*

# **How Can Language Teachers Help Their Students Avoid Withdrawing from the Language Course? A Self-Determination Theory Perspective**

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## **Abstract**

Student withdrawal from second language (L2) courses is a common challenge in higher education, often attributed to individual differences or course structure. However, less attention has been paid to the role of language teachers in preventing such withdrawal. Guided by Self-Determination Theory (SDT), this study investigates how students' perceptions of their teacher as supporting three basic psychological needs—autonomy, competence, and relatedness—affect their intention to withdraw from an L2 course. Data were collected from 269 Saudi university students enrolled in a compulsory English course, and analyzed using structural equation modeling (SEM). Results revealed that perceived teacher support for autonomy and relatedness significantly decreased students' withdrawal intentions, while competence had no direct effect. Although competence was not a significant predictor, its effect might be mediated by actual competency and a growth mindset. These findings highlight the importance of autonomy-supportive and relational teaching practices in reducing course attrition and sustaining learner engagement in L2 contexts.

## **Keywords**

Language course withdrawal, teacher role, self-determination theory, basic psychological needs (BPN), structural equation modeling (SEM), exploratory structural equation modeling (ESEM)

## **1 Introduction**

Language learning, particularly for second language (L2) students in undergraduate courses, is a complex endeavor. The intricacies of mastering grammar rules, overcoming spelling and pronunciation challenges, and navigating cultural nuances all contribute to the demanding nature of L2 acquisition. A persistent question arises amidst this complexity: why do some undergraduate students withdraw from language courses? This phenomenon raises concerns for language educators, prompting inquiries into factors ranging from students' linguistic struggles within courses to the pivotal role of teachers in influencing student retention or attrition (Alrabai, 2016; Gibson & Shutt, 2002; Nakamura, 2023). While

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these elements undoubtedly contribute to the attrition rates, research has not explored another critical dimension: the influence of teachers on students' decisions to continue or withdraw.

Traditionally, student withdrawal has often been attributed to shortcomings in language course design, such as curriculum structure, workload, ineffective teaching methodologies, lack of student engagement, mismatched expectations, or poor classroom management (Lobo, 2009; Gibson & Shutt, 2002). While these factors undoubtedly contribute to dropout rates, research has yet to fully explore the impact of teachers on L2 students' decisions to persist or discontinue a language course.

In recent years, there has been a shift towards exploring the dynamics between teachers and students within the context of language learning (Alrabai & Alamer, 2024; Moskovsky et al., 2013; Nakamura, 2023; Kamino & Hooper, 2024; Oga-Baldwin et al., 2017). This shift emphasizes the critical role of teachers, not only in imparting linguistic knowledge but also in shaping students' attitudes, motivation, and academic trajectories (Alrabai, 2016; Al Fraidan, 2024). Understanding how teachers contribute to reducing student withdrawal rates is a pressing concern that warrants exploration within the framework of self-determination theory (SDT; Ryan & Deci, 2017).

This research was conducted in a public Saudi university where English is taught as a foreign language to first-year students. Understanding student withdrawal in this unique sociocultural and educational context is vital, particularly given the top-down higher education reforms introduced as part of Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 strategy.

Research in language learning underscores the importance of satisfying the three basic psychological needs (BPN) of autonomy, competence, and relatedness among language learners to sustain their motivation, persistence, and positive outcomes (e.g., Alamer, 2022a; Alrabai & Alamer, 2024; Dincer et al., 2019; Noels, 2013, 2023; Oga-Baldwin et al., 2017). While previous SDT research has explored motivational variables in language learning, few studies have examined how perceived teacher behaviors, based on the three basic psychological needs, directly influence students' withdrawal intentions. This study uniquely focuses on this underexplored link. In addition to contributing to SDT theory, the study offers practical insights for TESOL professionals, particularly in understanding the potential role that teachers can play in mitigating intentions to withdraw from L2 courses.

## 2 Literature Review

### 2.1 Self-determination theory

SDT is a comprehensive framework of motivation that deals with understanding the complexities behind human motivation (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Ryan & Deci, 2020). Specifically, SDT highlights the role of intrinsic and extrinsic motivations and the social conditions which may affect these motivations. The broad aspect that SDT postulate is the role of BPN. SDT suggests that human motivation is driven by the fulfilment of the three basic psychological needs of *autonomy*, *competence*, and *relatedness*. These BPN are considered essential for psychological growth and performance in the language learning domain (Alamer, 2024, Alamer et al., 2025b; Noels, 2023, 2013; Moskovsky et al., 2013). We explain the BPN accordingly.

SDT posits that human motivation and optimal functioning stem from the satisfaction of three basic psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Autonomy is the need to feel volitional and self-directed in one's actions—for example, students are more motivated when allowed to choose topics or personalize tasks. Competence refers to the need to feel effective and capable; for instance, learners may feel motivated when they receive constructive feedback that helps them overcome linguistic challenges. Relatedness reflects the need to feel connected to others; in L2 contexts, students who feel that their teacher genuinely cares about their learning are more likely to persist. When these needs are fulfilled, students are more likely to experience intrinsic motivation and academic resilience.

While autonomy and relatedness have consistently emerged as strong motivational predictors across studies (Dincer et al., 2019; Noels, 2023), the role of competence shows mixed results. Some studies highlight its importance for academic efficacy (Kamino & Hooper, 2024), whereas others report minimal direct impact on engagement or withdrawal (Hajovsky et al., 2019).

## 2.2 The role of the teachers as providing BPN in the language classroom

Teachers play a pivotal role in nurturing students' BPN in the language classroom, thereby influencing their motivation, engagement, and overall learning outcomes. Teachers foster autonomy by offering students choices, encouraging goal-setting, and respecting learner input (Noels, 2013; Dincer et al., 2019). Competence can be supported by providing clear feedback and setting appropriately challenging tasks. Relatedness is nurtured through genuine teacher care, empathy, and constructive interaction. Perceptions of teacher behavior can significantly influence students' emotional responses and motivation, with recent evidence showing that perceived teacher strictness can heighten test anxiety in writing contexts (Al Fraidan, 2025).

Research grounded in SDT consistently underscores the importance of fostering autonomy, competence, and relatedness for optimum functioning and healthy performance (Alamer et al., 2025a; Deci et al., 2017). Empirical evidence suggests that when students perceive their environment as supportive and caring, they become more willing to invest effort and persist in their language studies (Alamer, 2025c; Noels, 2023; Kamino & Hooper, 2024; Schiefele, 2017). Although Hajovsky et al. (2019) found that teacher closeness alone did not directly enhance motivation, Voynova (2017) demonstrates that positive teacher-student relationships shape learners' approaches to academic tasks, often resulting in more engaged and purposeful learning behaviors. Drawing on SDT, Noels (2013) outlines a comprehensive framework for EFL instruction, highlighting that teachers who encourage student choice, provide constructive feedback, and involvement can effectively satisfy learners' BPN. Similarly, Dincer et al. (2019) show that teacher autonomy-support significantly predicts learners' need satisfaction and self-directed classroom engagement. Kamino and Hooper (2024) examined how teachers' support for student autonomy influences motivation and engagement among EFL learners. Through a mixed-methods approach involving surveys and interviews with Thai university students, the research finds that autonomy-supportive teaching practices significantly enhance learners' intrinsic motivation and active participation in language learning activities. The study underscores the importance of fostering autonomy in EFL classrooms to improve educational outcomes. Although studies have produced mixed results regarding the magnitude of relatedness, a consensus remains that fostering supportive teacher-student relationships is integral to boosting motivation. By promoting autonomy, bolstering competence, and maintaining positive social connections, teachers can create a learning environment conducive to sustained motivation, deeper engagement, and more resilient academic commitment (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Ryan & Deci, 2020).

## 2.3 Withdrawal from language courses

Student withdrawal from language courses can be attributed to various reasons, with numerous studies identifying diverse factors. Babad and Tayeb (2003) found that students withdrew due to concerns about course difficulty and their progress, opting to seek more suitable options. This behavior might suggest that teachers were not perceived as effective mediators, prompting students to seek courses with more adaptable instructors. Gibson & Shutt (2002) highlighted additional reasons, including initial course information, teaching methods, tutor managerial skills, student confidence, and prior knowledge of the target language and grammar. The managerial skills of tutors could also serve as an important indicator of the student-instructor relationship.

Many studies have underscored the importance of fulfilling students' basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness to enhance their motivation, engagement, and overall well-being (Alamer et al., 2023; Bureau et al., 2021). Teachers play a crucial role in this process specially for young learners (Alamer et al., 2025a; Oag-Baldwin et al., 2017). Teacher strategies that promote mindfulness and supportive teacher-student relationships are essential for creating a positive educational environment, which may in turn reduce student course withdrawal (Marsh & Alamer, 2024; Nakamura et al., 2024). While various studies have examined the importance of satisfying basic psychological needs from different perspectives, none have specifically investigated how these needs influence student withdrawal rates. The present study aims to address this gap by exploring how the three basic psychological needs—autonomy, competence, and relatedness—impact students' decisions to drop out of courses.

## 2.4 The present study and the hypothesized model

SEM was selected for its robustness in testing complex models with latent constructs and its ability to control for measurement error. The focus on student perceptions over the past month aligns with SDT's emphasis on recent motivational experiences and ensures temporal proximity to withdrawal decision-making during the university's official drop window.

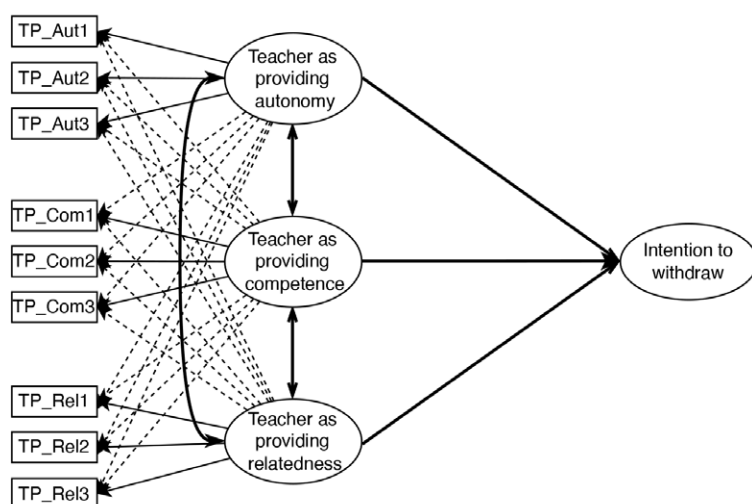
The role of language teachers in regulating and enhancing students' learning of the L2 is well documented in the field (Alrabai, 2016; Moskovsky et al., 2013), especially via the SDT perspective (Alamer et al., 2025a, 2025b; Alrabai & Alamer, 2024; Noels, 2013; 2023). However, it is still unclear how teachers who satisfy students' basic psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness can help students refrain from withdrawing the language course. This is important to consider because although withdrawing can be said to be related to individual differences, external factors such as teachers have a significant role in shaping students' decision. The present study investigates the effect of perceiving L2 teachers as providing autonomy, competence, and relatedness in the last month on lower students' intention to withdraw the language course in week designated by the university to accept requests to withdraw from current courses. As such our research question is as follow:

**RQ:** How does perceiving the language teacher as providing autonomy, competence, and relatedness over the past month influence L2 students' intention to withdraw from the course during the university's designated withdrawal week?

Based on SDT, our hypothesized model is illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1

*The Hypothesized Model*



#### 2.4.1. Relevance to previous research

It is crucial to acknowledge that the data used in this study is derived from Marsh and Alamer's (2024) study. However, it is important to note that from Marsh and Alamer's study was tutorial which discussed the set-ESEM and compared its parameters to the conventional CFA model. As such, Marsh and Alamer's (2024) study did not provide any theoretical arguments or pedagogical discussions about the results. Instead, the focus was solely on presenting the statistical differences between CFA and set-ESEM results in model fit indices, correlation magnitude, and path coefficients. Furthermore, the model specification employed in this study is different to that of Marsh and Alamer. In their study, the three factors of perception of as providing teacher competence, autonomy, and relatedness were hypothesized as antecedents of the three senses of self-meaning, self-confidence, and intrinsic motivation. These three factors were not included in this study, which resulted in different findings. Finally, the present study is theoretically sound as the three factors of BPN (i.e., teacher competence, autonomy, and relatedness) were postulated to directly explain students' intention to withdraw from the L2 courses. This aligns more with SDT perspective and allowed for explicit testing of the BPN theory<sup>1</sup>.

### 3 Methods

#### 3.1 Research Context

This study was conducted at a public university in Saudi Arabia, where English is taught as a compulsory L2 course for first-year undergraduate students. English instruction is structured and standardized across most Saudi institutions, and students are expected to reach a functional level of academic English. The research setting is situated within a broader national context of higher education transformation driven by Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030, which emphasizes educational quality, student motivation, and reduced dropout rates.

#### 3.2 Participants

Participants in this study were Saudi university students learning English as L2 at a public Saudi university. Data was collected through an online questionnaire, with 269 students involved. All participants, both male and female, were between 18 and 20 years of age ( $M = 18.5$ ,  $SD = .90$ ) and spoke Arabic as their native language. An invitation to participate was sent to these students through a Telegram channel dedicated to departmental announcements. Students were free to ignore the invitation or withdraw from the study at any time by simply closing the webpage. The data were used in a previous study (Marsh & Alamer, 2024); however, with a distinct goal, a different model configuration, and thus substantially different findings. Participants were asked to reflect on the teacher of a specific course called *Study Skills*, which was taught by two instructors. To ensure anonymity and encourage honest responses about teachers, students were not asked to identify their specific teacher or provide any information that could reveal their class affiliation. To ensure the best reflection of students' intention to withdraw, and to obtain retrospective evaluation, students were asked to complete the questionnaire during the week designated for submitting requests to withdraw from courses for that semester. As the same time, they asked to reflect on their experience with the teachers for the past month. The university's review committee approved the data collection procedures for this research.

#### 3.3 Instrument

To assess students' perception about their teacher as providing the three BPN, the BPN-L2 scale (Alamer, 2022a) was adapted, and slight modifications were necessary to fit the context of this study. To allow for longitudinal analysis, we asked the students to reflect on their past experience with their teachers in



retrospective manner (Cohen et al., 2011). The scale contains 12 items that are divided equally across the three factors of, competence, autonomy, and relatedness, with each factor being measured by four items. Participants were asked to indicate the extent to which they agree with each item on a 5-point Likert-type response format ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). An example item for autonomy is “My teacher provides us meaningful choices about the language lessons.” ( $\alpha = .87$ ;  $\omega = .88$ ), for competence “My teacher provides me with meaningful feedback for the language task” ( $\alpha = .87$ ;  $\omega = .88$ ), and relatedness “My teacher cares about my learning progress” ( $\alpha = .76$ ;  $\omega = .79$ ). To assess students’ intention to withdraw, 5 items were adopted from the study of Lounsbury et al. (2004). An example item is “I do not plan to continue studying in this class” ( $\alpha = .90$ ;  $\omega = .90$ ). The scale is based on a five-point Likert response similar to the BPN-L2 scale.

### 3.4 Statistical analysis

To understand the effect of the perception of the teacher as providing the BPN on students’ attention to withdraw we used structural equation modeling (SEM) to analyze our data. An exploratory-SEM (ESEM) was used for the measurement model (Alamer & Marsh, 2022; Asparouhov & Muthén, 2009). ESEM is an innovative analytical technique that allows researchers to integrate cross-loadings into measurement or predictive models determined by prior theoretical specifications. This capability enables a more accurate representation of the factor structure underlying conceptually related constructs (Alamer, 2022b; Morin et al., 2016, 2020), including constructs such as BPN satisfaction and frustration (Alamer et al., 2023). To date, ESEM has been successfully utilized in L2 research (e.g., Alamer, 2025; Dong et al., 2022; Liu et al., 2022), and the field now has established guidelines for its application (Alamer & Marsh, 2022). Compared to the traditional multiple regression analysis, SEM, and thus structural ESEM provides more reliable results as it accounts for the measurement errors and generate the model fit indices (Alamer, 2025; Alamer et al., 2025c; Sparks & Alamer, 2023). We analyzed the data using Jamovi 2.5.7 (The Jamovi Project, 2024). The assessment of the model includes the chi-square statistic,  $\chi^2$ , with its p-value and degrees of freedom ( $df$ ). Other relative model fit measures are also considered such as the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) with its 90% confidence interval, standardized root mean square residual (SRMR), comparative fit index (CFI), and Tucker–Lewis index (TLI). CFI and TLI values in the region of 0.95 indicate a good model fit, but values of approximately 0.90 can be acceptable. Both RMSEA and SRMR should be equal to or lower than 0.07 or 0.05 to achieve acceptable and good model fits, respectively (Hu & Bentler, 1999). Normality was inspected via skewness and kurtosis with a value of  $-2/2$  as a guideline (Alamer, 2025). However, the ESEM model was estimated using the maximum likelihood robust (MLR) estimator, which is robust to any observed nonnormality (Alamer, 2025; Morin et al. 2020).

## 4 Results

Table 1 presents the results of descriptive statistics, including the  $M$ ,  $SD$ , and the correlation matrix. With regard to the normality checks, no variable exceeded a value of  $-2/2$  in either skewness or kurtosis (Collier, 2020).

We first assessed the measurement model using ESEM methodology. The measurement model provided an excellent fit to the data ( $\chi^2 = 23.32$ ,  $df = 12$ ,  $p = .01$ , SRMR = .02, RMSEA = .06, RMSEA Low and Hi 95% CI [.03, .09], CFI = .99, TLI = .97). All factor loadings were above the cut-off value of .50 and only one item on relatedness was below this value. Following the recommendations (Marsh & Alamer, 2024; Morin et al., 2016) these items were retained in the model and indicate support for the convergent validity. The factor correlations in the ESEM were all below .70 indicating support for the discriminant validity of the measures (Morin, 2023).

Table 1

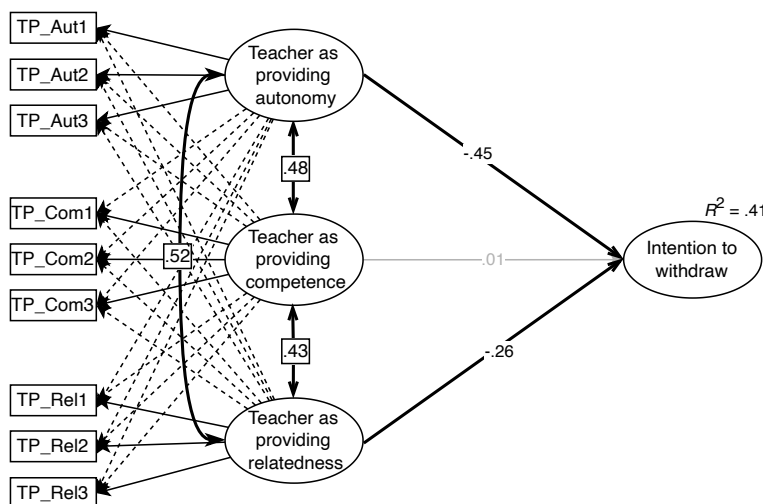
*Correlation Matrix between the Variables and Descriptive Statistics*

	1		2		3		4
1. Int to withdraw	3.37 (1.06)						
2. Teacher as providing relatedness	-0.51 ***	2.70 (1.07)					
3. Teacher as providing competence	-0.40 ***	0.61 ***	3.32 (1.11)				
4. Teacher as providing autonomy	-0.53 ***	0.68 ***	0.68 ***	2.88 (1.13)			

Note. \*\*\*  $p < .001$ ; values in the diagonal are Mean and between brackets are SD.

To answer our research question and examine the relationship between perceiving teacher as providing the three BPN and students' intention to withdraw, we first inspect the model fit indices. As shown in Figure 2, the results illustrated that the model fitted the data well ( $\chi^2 = 131.13$ ,  $df = 59$ ,  $p < .001$ , SRMR = .03, RMSEA = .07, RMSEA Low and Hi 95% CI [.05, .08], CFI = .97, TLI = .96). The results of the measurement model showed that the correlations between the predictor variables were within the acceptable levels (ranging from  $r = .42$  to  $r = .52$ ) indicated support to discriminant validity. The factor loadings were all high and significant (all above .50 and  $p < .001$ ) indicated support for convergent validity of the model. The predictor variables (i.e., the perception about the teacher as providing the three BPN) explained a large variance in the outcome variable (i.e., intention to withdraw), which was  $R^2 = .39$  (Adjusted  $R^2 = .38$ ). This indicate that around 39% of reasons for students to think about withdrawing can be attributed to the perception about the teacher as providing the three BPN. Specifically, it was found that perceiving teacher as providing autonomy as the stronger predictor of intention to withdraw ( $\beta = -.45$ , CI 95% [-.63, -.28],  $p < .001$ ) which indicated strong effect size, followed by perceiving teacher as providing relatedness ( $\beta = -.26$ , CI 95% [-.43, -.08],  $p < .001$ ) which indicated medium effect size. In contrast, perceiving teacher as providing competence failed to predict the outcome variable ( $\beta = .01$ , CI 95% [-.11, .13],  $p = .89$ ).

Figure 2

*The Results of the Structural Model*

## 5 Discussion

The present study explored the relationship between students' perceptions of their teachers as providers of autonomy, competence, and relatedness, and their intention to withdraw from language courses through the lens of SDT. The findings align with the broader literature emphasizing the importance of fulfilling BPN for sustained motivation and engagement (Alrabai & Alamer, 2024; Nakamura et al., 2024; Noels, 2023). This research adds a nuanced understanding of how BPN significantly impact student retention in language learning.

Students were asked to think about their experience with teachers from the past month while completing the questionnaire during the withdrawal request week. First, the study revealed that students who perceive their teachers as supporting autonomy are less likely to withdraw from the course. Autonomy, as explained by SDT, is the need to make choices based on one's values and goals. When teachers provide students with meaningful choices and the opportunity to take ownership of their learning, it enhances their sense of autonomy, which consequently enhances intrinsic motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2017). This aligns with prior research confirming that autonomy-supportive environments not only boost student engagement and motivation but also decrease withdrawal rates (Alamer, 2022b; Vallerand et al., 1997). In the context of language learning, where the basic psychological needs are crucial, these findings highlight the importance of teacher behaviors that foster student autonomy. As past studies have suggested, it can be postulated that autonomy increases interest in the second language, leading to less intention to withdraw. The strong negative relationship between perceived autonomy and intention to withdraw suggests that autonomy-based teaching practices should be a top priority for educators aiming to reduce decline rates in language courses.

Relatedness, the need to feel connected and supported by others, also emerged as a significant predictor of students' willingness to remain in the course. This supports previous findings that highlight the role of supportive teacher-student relationships in fostering student motivation and retention (Alrabai, 2016; Alrabai & Alamer, 2024). However, the effect size of relatedness on withdrawal intention was moderate compared to autonomy. This suggests that while feeling connected to the teacher is important, it may not be as critical as autonomy in predicting course retention. This finding is intriguing, especially considering studies such as Hajovsky et al. (2019), which found that the impact of relatedness can vary depending on the context. The social and educational environment of this study could also influence how relatedness affects learning behaviors. Strong teacher-student relationships are highly valued in this context, which might explain why relatedness is still an important factor for predicting students' intention to withdraw (Nakamura et al., 2024).

Contrary to expectations, the perception of the teacher as providing competence did not significantly predict students' intention to withdraw from the course. This finding does not directly align with SDT, which highlights the role of competence in motivation and engagement (Deci et al., 2017; Ryan & Deci, 2020). One possible explanation for this result is that the perceived competence provided by the teacher may not directly impact students' withdrawal rates but rather influence their overall academic performance and/or satisfaction (Dincer et al., 2019; Vallerand et al., 1997). The non-significant path from perceived competence suggests a more nuanced interpretation. While competence is vital in SDT, its role might be mediated by affective states such as enjoyment or self-efficacy. It is possible that students viewed competence as a broader institutional issue or tied it more to personal effort than to specific teacher actions.

From a statistical standpoint, this non-significant effect could be a result of mild multicollinearity between the variables of BPN as indicated by the high correlation. Hence, more statistical exploration could be investigated in future research. This outcome prompts further investigation into the contextual factors that might modulate the role of competence in educational settings. This study extends SDT by examining how teachers' support for basic psychological needs can reduce students' intentions to withdraw from L2 courses. While SDT has often been applied to general motivation and performance



outcomes, our findings suggest its value in explaining behavioral persistence in language learning, highlighting autonomy and relatedness as key protective factors. The non-significant role of competence invites further inquiry into how need fulfillment may function differently across cultural or academic contexts.

### 5.1 Pedagogical implications

The findings of this study have several important pedagogical implications for language educators aiming to reduce student withdrawal rates in L2 courses. First, the significant impact of perceived autonomy on reducing withdrawal underscores the need for teachers to create autonomy-supportive learning environments. Teachers can achieve this by offering meaningful choices, such as allowing students to select topics of interest for language projects or customizing certain aspects of the curriculum to align with students' goals and values. Such practices not only enhance intrinsic motivation but also align with findings by Alamer (2022b) and Vallerand et al. (1997), which emphasize the central role of autonomy in fostering persistence and engagement in language learning.

Second, fostering relatedness in the classroom is essential. The study highlighted the importance of supportive teacher-student relationships in reducing withdrawal intentions, which resonates with findings by Noels (2013) and Dincer et al. (2019). It is possible that teacher behaviors interpreted as overly controlling or strict may undermine students' sense of competence or relatedness, contributing indirectly to negative outcomes such as test anxiety and disengagement (Al Fraidan, 2025). Teachers can build a sense of community and belonging by actively engaging with students, offering constructive feedback, and showing genuine interest in their progress. For example, using collaborative activities and ensuring that all students feel valued in discussions can reinforce their sense of connectedness. While the effect of relatedness was moderate compared to autonomy, its role in promoting student retention suggests that relational strategies should complement autonomy-supportive practices. Although providing structure (competence) was not statistically related intention to withdraw, teachers can expect that the relationship can be indirect through intrinsic motivation. Teachers should be mindful of how their classroom behavior—especially strictness or inflexibility—might affect students' emotional experiences, including anxiety and withdrawal tendencies (Al Fraidan, 2025).

Previous study showed that the frustration of competence is significantly associated with decreased enjoyment and achievement (Alamer et al., 2023; Kamino & Hooper, 2024). Hence, teachers should be informed about the role of perceived competence in different learning settings. TESOL educators can benefit from intentionally designing classroom environments that support student autonomy and build interpersonal rapport. Practical strategies may include offering choice in topics or task formats, using individualized feedback, and showing authentic care for students' progress. By doing so, language teachers not only enhance learner motivation but also reduce attrition. Teacher-training programs should incorporate BPN-focused pedagogy as part of TESOL certification or professional development.

### 5.2 Limitations

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged to provide context for its findings and guide future research. First, the reliance on self-reported data introduces the possibility of response bias, as participants might have provided desirable answers rather than reflecting their actual withdrawal. Although steps were taken to ensure anonymity and encourage honest responses, the nature of self-report measures limits the ability to fully capture students' experiences. Second, the study was conducted within a single cultural and educational context, specifically Saudi university students learning English as a L2. While this focus provides valuable insights into this specific population, it limits the generalizability of the findings to other cultural or linguistic contexts. Cross-cultural studies are needed to explore whether the observed relationships between teachers' support of autonomy, competence, and relatedness and

students' withdrawal intentions hold across diverse educational settings. Lastly, the non-significant relationship between competence and withdrawal intentions warrants further investigation. It is possible that other mediating or moderating variables, such as students' prior academic achievements or external stressors, might influence this relationship.

## 6 Conclusion

This study contributes to the growing body of literature emphasizing the pivotal role of teachers in reducing student withdrawal rates from L2 courses through the lens of self-determination theory (Alamer, 2024; Alamer et al., 2023; 2025a, 2025b; Deci & Ryan, 1985; Dincer et al., 2019; Noels, 2013, 2023; Ryan & Deci, 2017, 2020). By examining the influence of perceived teacher support for autonomy, competence, and relatedness on students' intention to withdraw, the findings underscore the critical need to prioritize autonomy-supportive and relationally rich teaching practices. Specifically, autonomy emerged as the most influential factor in sustaining student engagement, highlighting the importance of empowering learners to make meaningful choices aligned with their personal goals and values (Alrabai & Alamer, 2024; Vallerand et al., 1997). While relatedness also played a significant role in fostering retention, the findings suggest that building supportive teacher-student relationships complements, rather than replaces, the foundational role of autonomy. This aligns with earlier research emphasizing that the combination of autonomy and connectedness is integral to creating motivationally supportive learning environments (Gibson & Shutt, 2002; Noels, 2013). The non-significant effect of perceived competence suggests that its role in withdrawal intentions may be more nuanced, warranting further investigation into contextual and mediating factors. For example, it could be postulated that its effect could be mediated by actual ability (Sparks et al., 2025) or students' growth mindset about their ability (Elahi Shirvan et al., 2024).

Overall, this study highlights the need for educators to go beyond traditional instructional methods by fostering environments that satisfy students' basic psychological needs. Doing so not only enhances motivation and engagement but also reduces the likelihood of withdrawal, ultimately contributing to more resilient and successful language learning trajectories. Future research should delve into these dynamics across diverse contexts and employ longitudinal (e.g., Sparks & Alamer, 2023, 2024) or experimental data (Alamer et al., 2025a; Alrabai & Alamer, 2024) to further elucidate the interplay between psychological need fulfillment and student persistence. Future research could benefit from intervention-based designs that explore how changes in teacher behavior over time affect motivational patterns and withdrawal decisions are needed. It would also be valuable to study mediating variables such as growth mindset, academic confidence, or emotions.

## Notes

1. This paper experienced multiple rejections from other journals before finally being accepted, largely due to one recurring reviewer who assessed it at four different journals. Unfortunately, this reviewer provided what we believe was an unscientific and excessively personal evaluation. The reviewer was able to identify the identity of at least one of the authors of this paper and used personal language which was already a concerning issue. Further, their feedback focused primarily on a claim that the dataset had been used in a different paper, despite clear explanations and transparent declarations of how the current study differed conceptually, analytically, and substantively. The reviewer offered minimal engagement with the actual content, theoretical contribution, or methodological rigor of the manuscript. Instead, the tone was often inappropriate and dismissive, including statements such as "self-citations [were used] only as justification", "the authors seek to build themselves as the leading expert voice", "stop re-using the same data" and "this paper CANNOT be published", which we consider to be in violation of scholarly ethics.

## Ethics Approval

The authors received ethical approval from the university to collect and conduct the research. Ref No. KFU-REC-2024-FEB-ETHICS2010

## Informed Consent

A consent message appears at the beginning of the questionnaire with preceding “next” indicating acceptance to participate. In addition, the participants were given the opportunity to withdraw at any point while filling out the questionnaire with no consequences.

## Availability of Data and Materials

The datasets generated and/or analysed during the current study are available in the OSF repository at the following link: [https://osf.io/mhqdx/?view\\_only=93b57af843254c3e8fbbd31a585123a8](https://osf.io/mhqdx/?view_only=93b57af843254c3e8fbbd31a585123a8).

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