


Research Article

A Case Study to Foster the Individual-level DMC Through the AI-assisted Study Abroad Framework: A Phenomenological Approach

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Article History:

Received:
14 May 2025

Revised:
17 August 2025

Accepted:
18 August 2025

Published in Issue:
30 June 2026

Abstract

Motivation is a complex dimension in language learning; however, the Directed Motivational Current (DMC) was recently introduced as a dynamic construct addressing engagement in long-term goal/vision for weeks, months, or years, rather than being limited to a single activity. This study sought to investigate the lived experiences related to enhancing individual-level DMC through the AI-assisted Study Abroad Framework from a phenomenological perspective. To this end, a longitudinal single-case design was used. The participant, an Iranian female migrant to Canada, was selected through purposive sampling. This longitudinal case study was conducted over two years. For data collection, semi-structured interviews, teacher-as-researcher observations, motometers, composite data display charts, and the DMC disposition scale were used. Data analysis was conducted using a phenomenological approach to capture diverse insights and lived experiences throughout this longitudinal study. The results showed that the Study Abroad Framework was practically effective in developing the core characteristics of the DMC construct. Moreover, by triangulating datasets, particularly motometer data, it was shown that the AI-assisted approach used in this study accelerated the development of the DMC construct by re-energizing the participant's engagement in activities related to the three core components of DMC. The results have implications for teachers, practitioners, and curriculum planners seeking long-term learner engagement.

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Keywords: AI; DMC; Motometers; Phenomenology; Study Abroad Framework

Cite this article: Teimourtash, M., Yazdanimoghaddam, M., & Abbasian, Gh. (2026). A case study to foster the individual-level DMC through the AI-assisted Study Abroad Framework: A phenomenological approach. *Journal of Education Experiences*, 9 (1), 30-45. <http://doi.org/10.57647/jee.2026.0901.03>

1. Introduction

English plays a central role in many people's lives today. For migrants, it is not only the matter of passing a school subject but a basic tool for working, studying, and handling daily communication needs. They are often language users rather than merely language learners because they need English to handle official formalities, find a suitable job, and build up new circle of friends and

social networks in the target community. In such situations, motivation is not a luxury-like complementary tool; it becomes a key construct for survival and adaptation in the target community. Motivation helps learners begin and keep working toward their desired subgoals and ultimate goals (Lamb, 2017; Muir & Gümüş, 2020). Research has shown that motivation is seemingly influenced by both personal traits and the immediate learning environment.

Most importantly, its fluid-like nature can also change over time (Al-Hoorie, 2017; Gümüş, 2019). The complex dynamic systems (CDS) perspective offers a way to understand this change. From a CDS view, motivation is a dynamic process that interacts with many other factors and can follow non-linear paths (Larsen-Freeman, 1997, 2012). In this context, Dörnyei and colleagues introduced the concept of Directed Motivational Currents (DMCs). A DMC is a strong, sustained current of motivation that carries the learner toward a highly valued end state over an extended period (Dörnyei, Henry, & Muir, 2016; Henry, Davydenko, & Dörnyei, 2015).

DMC describes a long-term, self-reinforcing motivational process driven by a clear vision, a facilitative structure, i.e., checklists, staged goals, and stable behavioral routines (Dörnyei, Ibrahim, & Muir, 2015; Muir, 2016). When these elements synergistically work, learners may experience long period of focused work, even if they feel tired, anxious, or busy. In case of adult migrants who must quickly meet their needs in a new language environment, such currents of motivation could play important roles (Keyhan, 2025).

However, the existing DMC literature still has some important gaps. First, most empirical studies have focused on classroom learners, often in EFL contexts, and many interventions are built around the “Eyes on the Final Product” framework or short-term classroom projects. Other DMC frameworks proposed by Dörnyei et al. (2016), such as the Study Abroad framework, have received much less attention. The Study Abroad framework is particularly relevant for migrants because it connects classroom tasks to real communicative challenges in the host community. Yet we still know little about how this framework can be adapted for online teaching and long-term individual support.

Second, there is limited research on DMCs in online, technology-rich, or AI-assisted settings. Many adult migrants now rely on online lessons and digital tools (Amini & Karimi, 2025), but most DMC studies have not explored how such tools might support or shape a motivational current over time. AI-based conversational apps, for example, can offer low-risk rehearsal and immediate feedback (Mashinchi, 2024), but their role in the motivational process has not been systematically examined.

Third, there are few long-term case studies that follow one adult migrant’s motivational experience in detail. Much of the existing work uses group-level data or short interventions.

The present study addresses these gaps by exploring one adult migrant learner’s long-term motivational experience in an AI-assisted online English program. The program was designed with the Study Abroad DMC framework in mind, linking online tasks to real-life community activities in the host country. The aim of this

study is to explore how an adult migrant learner experiences and interprets a possible DMC-like process during a two-year, AI-assisted online English program, framed by the Study Abroad DMC framework. Based on this aim, the study is guided by two research questions:

RQ1. How does the learner perceive her Directed Motivational Current (DMC) experience during the AI-assisted online English program?

RQ2. How does the learner perceive changes in her motivational engagement over time in relation to this DMC experience?

2. Literature Review

2.1. Motivation and dynamic perspectives

Early models of L2 motivation often treated motivational tendencies as relatively stable traits or as the result of fixed factors such as attitudes, integrativeness, or instrumental goals (Nasimi, 2025). Newer views emphasize change and interaction. The complex dynamic systems (CDS) perspective highlights this change. CDS shows that motivation can vary, interact with context, and behave nonlinearly (Larsen-Freeman, 2012).

From a CDS view, motivation can fluctuate from moment to moment, and small fluctuations can sometimes lead to larger shifts in the level of learner engagement. DMC research follows this dynamic view and focuses on long-term motivational processes. This approach has encouraged researchers to use longitudinal and process-oriented designs, by conducting intensive qualitative studies, to trace motivational trajectories rather than simply measure averages at one or two time points (Başöz, & Gümüş, 2022; Dörnyei, Muir, & Ibrahim, 2014).

Within this dynamic turn, Directed Motivational Currents (DMCs) have been proposed as one specific type of motivational pattern: a strong, self-sustaining current that organizes effort over time (Dörnyei et al., 2016; Başöz & Gümüş, 2022).

2.2. Directed Motivational Currents (DMCs)

Dörnyei et al. (2015) define a DMC as “a prolonged process of engagement in a series of tasks which are rewarding primarily because they transport the individual towards a highly valued end” (p. 98). In other words, despite the demanding process of learning, a DMC is usually characterized by a sense of momentum because the learner can feel moving forward. Likewise, achieving proximal goals are considered rewarding because it signals progress toward the ultimate end points, i.e., vision. Although learners experience rise and fall during a DMC, the overall pathway is clear, so making mistaking or setbacks are no longer interpreted as final failures (Muir, 2016, 2020; Poupore, 2024).

2.3. Core features of DMCs

Most studies describe three core features of DMCs:

- **Goal / vision orientation:** A DMC is driven by a clear, personally meaningful future image or vision. By setting proximal goals which are smaller, concrete, measurable, and achievable steps, learners reenergize their energy to obtain more subgoals. This process guides the learners' daily efforts toward achieving the larger vision (Dörnyei & Kubanyiova, 2014).
- **Salient facilitative structure:** The use of a visible structure of tasks, simply put, checklists, in the language learning process, supports the triggering and sustaining DMC. Actually, checklists and regular progress checks give learners feedbacks contributing to trigger and sustain motivation throughout long period (Zarrinabadi, Ketabi, & Tavakoli, 2019).
- **Behavioral routines:** Throughout DMC, learners develop some routines that make the practicing process regular and automatic. Routines can reduce the need for conscious willpower, and they get done without devoting much energy and effort, so often lead to positive feelings about learning (Ibrahim, 2016b; Muir & Dörnyei, 2013). These features are no longer considered separately.

Vision guides the choice of structure; structure supports routines; routines generate experiences that confirm or reshape the vision.

2.4. DMCs and related motivational theories

In relation to other theories, DMC overlaps with some existing theories but is different in scope:

- **Goal-setting theory** stresses clear targets and feedback while DMC adds a longer, self-sustaining process of motivational momentum (Leeming & Harris, 2022).
- **Flow theory** focuses on deep absorption in short tasks, however, DMC focuses more on extended period. Actually, DMC contribute sustaining repeated steps toward a vision (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Dörnyei et al., 2015).
- **Self-determination theory (SDT)** stresses some features, like autonomy, and relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 2002). DMCs are compatible with SDT but put more emphasis on the dynamic build-up of motivational energy. For example, a DMC may involve increased feelings of competence and autonomy over time, but its key feature is the sense of being carried forward by a current of action (Yazawa, 2020).

These connections suggest that DMC research is not separate from other motivational work; rather, it offers a

more process-oriented lens on how strong, extended engagement can unfold.

2.5. DMC frameworks and the Study Abroad option

To make DMCs practically useful for pedagogy, Dörnyei et al. (2016) proposed seven frameworks or typical patterns through which a DMC might be triggered and supported. Many empirical studies so far have focused on classroom projects, often linked to the "Eyes on the Final Product" framework, where learners work toward a tangible outcome such as a presentation or product. The Study Abroad framework is less-examined. It organizes the learner's efforts around adapting to the life in a target-language community. In this framework, classroom activities are more likely to focus on the learner's real-world needs, i.e., opening a bank account, visiting a doctor, talking to colleagues, or handling daily shopping. Proximal goals are framed as preparation for these real encounters. For migrants, the Study Abroad framework is highly relevant because their language needs are immediate and embedded in the host community. However, there is still limited research on how this framework can be implemented in online courses for adult migrants, and how it might support a DMC-like process when combined with digital or AI tools.

2.6. Empirical DMC research and existing gaps

Empirical DMC research has increased in the last decade. Some studies show DMC-like experiences in various learner groups (Henry et al., 2015; Ibrahim, 2020). Muir (2016) developed a DMC disposition measure. Other studies investigated DMC in classroom settings to provide a vivid picture of learners' lived experiences (Ibrahim, 2016a, 2017; Selçuk & Erten, 2017; Zarrinabadi & Tavakoli, 2017). Some intervention-based studies, likewise, tried to focus more on factors to trigger DMC features (Garcia-Pinar, 2022; Pietluch, 2021; Watkins, 2016). Most empirical work focuses on the main DMC dimensions. There is less research on the full set of seven DMC frameworks proposed by Dörnyei et al. (2016). Despite this growing body of research, several gaps remain important for the present study:

- **Framework focus:** Most intervention studies draw on project-type frameworks. The Study Abroad framework, which is especially relevant for migrants, has received far less empirical attention.
- **Context:** Many studies are situated in traditional classroom settings with younger students or university learners. There is limited work on adult migrants who must integrate into a new society and use English for survival and professional purposes.
- **Modality and tools:** Few DMC studies examine online or AI-assisted programs. We still know little

about how digital tools, such as conversational AI apps, might support or modify the core elements of vision, structure, and routines (Mashayekh, 2025).

- **Timescale and design:** Long-term, single-case, phenomenological investigations of DMC are rare. Yet such designs can provide detailed insight into how a DMC-like experience is built and experienced over time, especially for learners with complex migration histories.

These gaps motivate the present study's focus on a two-year single-case, AI-assisted, Study Abroad-oriented program for an adult migrant learner.

2.7. Theoretical framework for the present study

This study is grounded in the CDS view of motivation and the DMC framework as developed by Dörnyei and colleagues. Motivation is treated as a dynamic, context-sensitive process that can change across time and tasks. Within this dynamic space, the study looks for evidence of a DMC-like current in the learner's lived experience.

The three core components of DMC, i.e., vision, facilitative structure, and behavioral routines, serve as guiding lenses for both the design of the learning program and the analysis of the data. The Study Abroad framework shapes how lessons and tasks are planned: online activities are linked to real-life community situations in the host country. The learner's interviews, reflective diaries, observations, and motometer traces are then interpreted in terms of how they reflect or challenge these DMC components over time.

By adopting this theoretical framework, the study aims to contribute a detailed, phenomenological account of one adult migrant learner's DMC experience in an AI-assisted online program, thus extending empirical work on both the Study Abroad framework and technology-supported motivational currents.

3. Method

3.1. Research design

This study used a longitudinal single-case study design with a phenomenological orientation. The aim was to gain an in-depth understanding of one adult migrant learner's lived motivational experience during a two-year AI-assisted online English program. Rather than testing a hypothesis with a large sample, the study followed one participant over time and examined how her DMC-like process evolved in a real-life context. The design is qualitative in its main focus, but it also uses simple quantitative indicators, i.e., motometer values, as supportive, descriptive data. The overall logic is that rich, multi-source qualitative data are needed to capture how vision, structure, routines, emotions, and AI-supported

practice work together across time in one learner's experience.

3.2. Participant and context

A purposive sampling was used. Maria, the participant's pseudonym, is a 47-year-old Iranian woman migrated to Canada. She had immediate language needs in the target community. After she agreed to voluntarily take part in a long-term online program and data collection, she was selected. In Iran, she worked as a QC manager in the food industry for years. She later ran her own small business in clothing design industry. She and her husband, who is also a manager in the food industry, had a relatively high social and economic status. They have two sons; one son migrated to Canada before them, and the parents later followed. Although Maria had strong professional and social skills, she described English as her Achilles' heel. Before migration, she mainly studied English in traditional classes in Iran. She reported very low confidence in speaking and limited ability to use English in real-life situations. After arriving in Canada, sudden changes in migration rules and problems with a migration agency forced her to stay longer and seek work. These changes increased pressure, because she needed to find a job quickly but could not use English effectively in daily life, official tasks, or workplace communication. Emotionally, she reported high anxiety, uncertainty, and a perfectionist attitude to language learning. In September 2023 she contacted the researcher, who also became her teacher, via email as a "last chance" to fix her English. In the first online session, she appeared tense and unsure, but she was motivated to work hard if she saw practical progress.

Table 1. Summary of the participant profile

Variable	Description
Pseudonym	Maria
Age	47
Gender	Female
Nationality / Residence	Iranian → Canada
Pre-migration occupation	QC manager; small clothing business owner
Family	Husband (manager), two sons (one in Canada)
Social background	High social status in Iran
Initial English level	CEFR A1 (after needs analysis)
Main challenge	Very low speaking ability; anxiety; perfectionist
Study duration	2 years (Sept 2023-Aug 2025)
Sampling method	Purposive single-case
Key strengths	Motivated for practical goals; tech-savvy; consistent attendance

The learning context was a fully online one-to-one course delivered via Google Meet. The course was designed and taught by the researcher and followed the Study Abroad DMC framework. All sessions were held while Maria was living in Canada, needing English for daily life and work.

3.2.1. Program design: Online Study Abroad-oriented course and AI support

The instructional program was designed based on the Study Abroad DMC framework as a guiding lens. The ultimate goal was to connect online lesson tasks to real-life activities, i.e., needs such as banking, shopping, job interviews, workplace communication, in the target community. Each lesson followed the principles of ESA lesson model:

- **Engage:** short warm-up, personal check-in, and review of the previous week's real-life events and feelings.
- **Study:** focused work on useful language items linked to upcoming tasks in the community.
- **Activate:** fantasy role-plays, simulations, and planning for real-life use, i.e., preparing for a visit to the bank or a talk with a manager.

The online program consisted of 120 one-to-one lessons over two years (45-50 minutes each). Each lesson was divided into roughly five-minute blocks, which helped integrate motometer ratings and small, proximal goals. Weekly and monthly plans were prepared by the teacher-researcher to keep a clear sequence of subgoals that served Maria's larger vision: being able to manage daily life and workplace communication in English without fear. An AI conversational tool, Pi, was used as a practice partner. Pi supported short dialogues, phrase rehearsal, and quick checks before Maria tried real interactions in the community, such as at a shop, workplace, or bank. Pi did not replace teaching or produce analytic data; it functioned as a supportive tool to increase the frequency and safety of practice opportunities.

3.3. Instruments

The study used multiple instruments. They were used as complementary to provide a clear picture of the participant's lived motivational experience.

3.3.1. Semi-structured interviews

Throughout the study, five semi-structured interviews were conducted via Google Meet. The first one was at the beginning of the study. At the key climaxes, three follow-up interviews were conducted. The last interview was at the end of the study. Each interview lasted about 45 to 50 minutes. The interviews explored language learning

history, migration background and challenges, goals and expectations, feelings about the course and AI use, reflections on progress and difficulties.

All interviews were audio-recorded, besides receiving the consent from the participant. Then, they were all transcribed verbatim. To provide a more convenient situation for the participant, the language used in the interviews was in Persian. They were translated into English for further phases such as reporting and analysis.

3.3.2. Reflective diaries

Maria wrote a short weekly diary throughout the study. In each entry she described what practice activities she did inside and outside class, important events in daily life involving English, emotions such as anxiety, pride, or frustration, and her own sense of progress or lack of progress. The diaries also worked as checklists for proximal goals. She often wrote what she planned to do and later checked what was completed.

3.3.3. Teacher-as-researcher observation and memos

After each lesson, the teacher-researcher completed a structured observation checklist inspired by O'Leary's (2020) classroom observation toolkit. The checklist recorded level of engagement and participation, task performance and visible effort, interactional moves, such as questions, self-repair, use of new phrases, and notable events that might influence motivation, such as a successful real conversation, a difficult task. In addition, the researcher wrote reflexive memos to document decisions, changes in lesson plans, and personal reactions to Maria's progress and difficulties. These memos were used later to support reflexivity and to track how the teacher-researcher role may have influenced interpretation.

3.3.4. Motometer

The motometer is a simple visual rating tool adopted from Gardner et al. (2004), updated by motivational grids (Pawlak, 2012), and used in previous research (de Bot, 2015). In this study, each online session included one motometer sheet with ten thermometer-shaped bars marked from 0 (no motivation) to 100 (very high motivation). During each 45-50 minute lesson, Maria shaded one bar every five minutes to show her momentary motivation and enjoyment. Completing the motometer took only a few seconds and did not interrupt lesson flow. After each session, the motometer sheet was saved, as a PDF or image, labelled with the session number and date, and later converted into numerical values for simple descriptive analysis and visual timelines (See Appendix A).

3.3.5. AI practice tool (Pi)

Pi is an AI chatbot used as a free conversation partner. Maria used Pi to rehearse phrases before real interactions, to check correctness and appropriateness of expressions, to simulate short dialogues, such as at the bank or with co-workers, and to practice outside lesson time. Pi was not used to generate codes or themes. However, Pi-supported episodes often appeared in diaries, interviews, and observation notes, and therefore became part of the qualitative data about her motivational experience.

3.4. Data linking and storage

All materials, i.e., audio files, transcripts, motometer sheets, observation forms, diaries, and lesson plans, were stored in an encrypted project folder. Every file was labelled with a pseudonym, session number, date, and instrument type. This system created a clear link between different sources and supported later triangulation.

3.5. Procedure and data collection

Data collection, besides the teaching process, took place from September 2023 to August 2025. Four main phases of the procedure can be described as follows:

Phase 1: Pre-intervention (needs analysis and baseline)

Primarily, to understand the participant's background, needs, and motivational state, a detailed needs analysis was carried out. During the first online meeting, the researcher and the participant discussed her language-related migration challenges, language learning background, and challenges in real-life tasks in Canada. The first online meeting focused on migration story and current life context, past English learning experiences, specific tasks that were difficult, such as job interviews, banking, workplace talk, and emotions, like anxiety, shame, and hope, related to English. Maria also wrote an initial self-reflection note about her fears and expectations. The first semi-structured interview was held in this phase. The researcher used these data to design a long-term learning plan following the Study Abroad framework. At this stage, no clear DMC was present; motivation was mainly instrumental and survival-based, and this served as a baseline (See [Appendix A](#)).

Phase 2: Implementation (AI-assisted Study Abroad-oriented course)

The main intervention consisted of 120 online lessons over two years. Each lesson was delivered via Google Meet and followed the ESA-like structure. Each week, the

teacher-researcher prepared clear proximal goals related to upcoming real-life activities, for example, first phone call to a manager, first visit to a doctor, and first small talk with colleagues. During lessons the motometer was filled every five minutes. Short tasks (role-plays, problem-solving, phrase drills) were used in 5-minute blocks. Homework and community tasks were assigned (e.g., using Pi to practice, then trying the phrase in real life). Pi was used inside and outside class to rehearse and test language in low-risk situations. Maria also kept her weekly diary, and the teacher completed observation checklists and memos after each lesson.

Phase 3: Ongoing monitoring and mid-course interviews

Throughout the study, monitoring was systematic. Motometer values were logged for each session. Diaries were collected weekly and read before the next lesson. Observation checklists and memos were written after every session.

When the motometer timelines or diaries showed drops in motivation, the researcher adjusted upcoming lessons, for example by simplifying tasks, revisiting successful activities, or creating new community-based challenges. Three mid-course semi-structured interviews were scheduled approximately every six months. These interviews allowed Maria to reflect more deeply on her changing motivation, routines, emotions, and use of Pi in daily life.

Phase 4: Integration, member checking, and data preparation

At the end of the two-year study, a final interview was conducted. The researcher then integrated all the data. Composite displays were created that combined motometer timelines, diary excerpts, and observation notes for key sessions (e.g., early sessions, first successful real conversation, first job interview, final sessions). These displays helped identify where motivation rose or fell and what activities were connected to those changes (See [Appendix A](#)). During member checking, selected summaries and visual timelines were shared with Maria. She was invited to confirm, clarify, or challenge the researcher's interpretations. Her comments were noted and integrated into the final data set.

3.6. Data preparation and traceability

Before analysis, all data were prepared carefully.

- **Transcription and checking:** All interviews were transcribed verbatim in Persian. Transcripts were checked according to the original audio files and corrected where needed.

- **Motometer numeric logs:** Each motometer sheet was turned into numerical values (0-100) for each 5-minute point. Data were entered into spreadsheets with session number, date, and time indexes.
- **Digital organization:** All files (transcripts, diaries, observation forms, memos, motometer logs) were organized by session number and stored in an encrypted folder. A master index file recorded available for each session, including pseudonym, session number, date, and file types.
- **Software and audit trail:** The obtained transcripts, diaries, observation notes, and memos, i.e., qualitative data, were all imported into MAXQDA (version 2022). Motometer spreadsheets were managed in Excel. Coding decisions, theme changes, and analytic memos were documented inside MAXQDA, creating an audit trail that can be followed by an independent reader.

3.7. Data analysis

The main analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis, with a phenomenological focus on the participant's lived experience of DMC.

The steps were:

1. **Familiarization:** The researcher read all transcripts, diaries, and observation notes several times and reviewed motometer timelines to get a holistic sense of the motivational journey.
2. **Initial coding:** Coding began inductively. The researcher highlighted meaningful statements and actions related to motivation, goals, emotions, routines, AI-supported practice, and community experiences. Short labels (codes) were given to each extract. Codes were entered into MAXQDA and linked to session numbers and dates.
3. **Searching for themes:** Related codes were grouped into candidate subthemes and themes. The researcher

looked for patterns across different data sources, such as interview, diary, and observation, and across time. DMC components, i.e., vision, structure, routines, positive emotionality, acted as sensitizing concepts, but no theme was forced to fit the model.

4. **Reviewing themes:** Candidate themes were checked against the raw data. Composite displays were used to see whether motometer peaks or drops aligned with diary comments and observation notes. Themes that were weak or overlapping were revised, merged, or removed.
5. **Defining and naming themes:** Each final theme was defined in a codebook with: a clear description, inclusion-exclusion rules, key subthemes, and typical codes. The themes were named to reflect both DMC-related elements and the learner's own language.
6. **Producing the report:** The final step was to write up the themes with illustrative quotations and, where appropriate, motometer evidence and observation notes. To keep traceability clear, each quote is marked with a code, such as I-S1 for Interview Session 1, R-S22 for Reflection, O-S38 for Observation.

3.7.1. Handling of motometer data

Motometer values were treated as indicators of momentary subjective states, not as psychometric measurements.

Descriptive statistics and timeline plots were produced in Excel. Motometer peaks and troughs were interpreted only when supported by diary comments or observation notes.

No motometer spike was used alone to make a claim, i.e., a rise or fall in motometer values was interpreted only when supported by qualitative data from the same period. For example, the diary or observation note describing a difficult task or a successful real interaction (See Appendix A).

Table 2. Summary of data collection

Data source	Collector	Timing / frequency	Format / storage	Main purpose
Semi-structured interviews	Researcher	5 times (start, 3 midpoints, end)	Audio → verbatim transcript (DOC/PDF)	Explore history, goals, emotions, reflections
Reflective diaries	Participant	Weekly	Text files / scanned handwritten notes	Capture practice, feelings, events
Classroom observations	Teacher–researcher	After each of 120 lessons	Checklists + field notes (DOC/PDF)	Record engagement and notable incidents
Reflexive memos	Teacher–researcher	After each lesson / key decisions	Text files	Support reflexivity, track decisions
Motometer sheets	Participant	Every lesson (10 ratings per session)	PDF/image → numeric spreadsheet	Trace moment-to-moment motivation
AI interactions (Pi usage)	Participant	Throughout study, in and outside lessons	Indirectly via diaries/interviews	Show extra-practice and low-risk rehearsal

3.7.2. Saturation in a single-case design

In a single-case study, saturation does not mean that no new words ever appear. Instead, it refers to the point where no substantially new themes emerge from additional data and where existing themes are richly filled with examples across different time points and data sources. In this study, after coding materials from late sessions, for example, after Session 100, and comparing them to earlier phases, no new major themes were found.

New data mainly provided further illustrations of existing patterns, i.e., practical routines, emotional reinforcement, AI-supported practice. This suggested that thematic saturation had been reached for this case.

3.7.3. Trustworthiness, reflexivity, and ethical considerations

To increase the trustworthiness of the study, several strategies were used as follows:

- **Reflexive memos:** The researcher wrote memos after lessons. This was done to record instruction decisions immediately after the session, and also to reflect on the teacher-researcher role. These memos helped the researcher keep a critical distance and identify or reduce bias.
- **Peer review of coding:** A colleague experienced in qualitative research reviewed a sample of coded transcripts and a draft version of the theme structure. Feedback led to refining some code definitions and theme names. Notes from this process were kept as part of the audit trail.
- **Member checking:** In the final phase, the researcher shared summaries of key themes and selected composite displays with Maria. She was invited to confirm or correct interpretations. Her agreements and clarifications were recorded and integrated into the final analysis.
- **Triangulation:** Whenever possible, themes were supported by at least two different data sources, i.e., interview, diary, motometer, and observation. This cross-checking reduced the risk of over-interpreting single events or single statements.
- **Audit trail:** MAXQDA logs, codebook entries, memos, and the master index of files provide a clear trail of how data were transformed into codes, and then into themes. This supports dependability and confirmability.

3.7.4. Ethical considerations and AI use

The participant gave written informed consent before data collection began. She was informed about the purpose of the study, the dual role of the teacher-researcher, the use of AI, Pi, as part of practice and for translation of selected

excerpts, the pseudonymization of her identity, her right to withdraw at any time. All interviews, reflections, and observation transcripts were in Persian. For the purposes of analysis, the researcher first worked with the Persian data in the original language. For reporting in English, the required selected excerpts were translated into English. It was done by Chat-GPT (version 2025). To avoid any misinterpretation, the researcher manually checked, and edited if needed, all translated excerpts. To clarify the meanings to ensure that the translated quotes reflected their intended messages, the researcher asked the teachers, the participants, to check the English version of the quotes. This two-step process aimed to reduce human translation bias while keeping the authenticity of the participant's voice. The AI practice tool Pi was used only for language rehearsal and feedback; no sensitive personal information was intentionally shared. Nevertheless, the study acknowledges that complete control over third-party data handling cannot be guaranteed. Therefore, sensitive topics were avoided in Pi interactions, and critical migration or legal details were discussed only directly with the researcher and not through AI.

4. Results

This section reports how the participant's motivational engagement developed over the two-year AI-assisted Study Abroad program. The analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step thematic analysis. Data from semi-structured interviews, reflective diaries, teacher-as-researcher observations, and motometer traces were compared and coded. Four main themes were identified. They explain (a) how the learner understood and described her long-term motivational experience, and (b) how her engagement changed throughout the study.

Theme 1 - From Shock to Survival Vision: A Real-life Trigger

DMC component: Goal/vision-orientedness (trigger)

The participant's motivation began with a clear, urgent need. She had to stay in Canada and find work, so learning English became necessary. This need acted as a strong and practical trigger.

It was not a "dream" of becoming a native speaker; it was a real life goal that pushed her to start and keep going. This pressure created an urgent, practical vision, i.e., to become able to handle life in English. In the first interview, she described English as the main barrier to her new life: *"I felt like everything here is locked because of English. I cannot even say my name properly. I must fix this or I cannot stay."* (Interview - Session 1)

Her early diary entries also showed a mixture of fear and urgency:

"I am very scared. I avoid talking to people. If I make mistakes, I feel ashamed. But I have no option. I must learn or I lose my chance here." (Reflective Diary - Session 2)

Observation notes from the first sessions confirmed this picture. She appeared tense, avoided long answers, and used her first language when she felt stuck:

"She keeps answers very short and looks uncomfortable when asked to repeat. When tasks link to bank, shopping, or family, she is more focused but still very anxious." (Classroom Observation - Session 3)

In DMC terms, this theme shows how a clear, high-stakes trigger emerged from real-life demands rather than from a long-held ideal L2 self. Her DMC-like journey did not start with a dream of becoming fluent or native-like, but with a survival-based vision: to be able to live, work, and manage daily life independently in English.

Theme 2 - Structures that Carried the Current: Routines, Checklists, and Guided Tasks

DMC component: Salient facilitative structure

As the program continued, structured support played a central role in turning this urgent need into repeated action. The Study Abroad framework was implemented through clear proximal goals, weekly plans, and 5-minute task blocks within each online session. The participant's diaries show how these structures helped her to see and manage her progress:

"Every week I write what I want to do: call the bank, ask about my son's school, talk to my neighbor. After class, I check what I did. It makes me feel I am really moving." (R - S12)

She also reported that breaking lessons into short stages made the work feel possible:

"The small steps help me. Five minutes listening, five minutes practicing, five minutes speaking. It is not too heavy, but after the lesson I see I did a lot." (I - S15)

Observation notes document how these structures were used consistently:

"Lesson plan follows 5-minute cycles (warm-up, controlled practice, community-linked role-play). Motometer marking every 5 minutes does not interrupt the flow." (O - S19)

Motometer traces supported this theme. In early sessions, like S1, mean motivation scores fluctuated between 40 to 45, with frequent drops when tasks felt too open. In later sessions, like S38 and S75, that clearer step-by-step tasks were provided, the mean scores rose into the 70s, with smaller fluctuations. These patterns suggest that visible structure and short, manageable tasks helped to stabilize and channel her energy over time.

Overall, Theme 2 shows that facilitative structure, i.e., weekly checklists, ESA-style lesson design, and regular

self-monitoring, was a key condition for sustaining the motivational current once the initial survival trigger was in place.

Theme 3 - Emotion in Motion: Fluctuations, Micro-Successes, and AI-Supported Confidence

DMC component: Positive emotionality

The participant's emotional experience was not flat. Her motivation rose and fell within and across sessions, but many small micro-successes helped her to recover from low points. She repeatedly described moments when she felt exhausted, then suddenly encouraged by hearing herself speak better or by handling a real-life situation successfully.

In one mid-course interview, she reflected:

"Sometimes I come to class very tired and I think: I can't do this anymore. But then I listen to old recordings and I see how I spoke before. I laugh and think: okay, I am not perfect, but I am not the same person." (I - S38)

A diary entry illustrates how AI-assisted practice produced quick, low-risk successes:

"Today I used Pi before calling the bank. I practiced the sentences two times. On the phone, I could say them. The lady understood me. After the call I was shaking but also proud." (R - S22)

The teacher-researcher observations noted similar patterns:

"Motometer curve in S38 shows a clear dip during a challenging role-play, then a sharp rise after successful rehearsal with Pi and positive feedback. Learner smiles, repeats phrases with more confidence." (O - S38)

Across sessions, motometer data showed short drops during difficult tasks, followed by increases after successful performances or supportive feedback. These curves matched diary descriptions of "feeling brave", "feeling like a real person here", or "finally doing something alone".

Theme 3 thus highlights how emotional cycles, especially positive reinforcement after small successes, fed back into the DMC process. AI (Pi) acted as a safe rehearsal partner that reduced anxiety before real interactions, making it easier for the learner to experience success and rebuild energy.

Theme 4 - From Classroom Tasks to Real-Life Action: Growing Communicative Agency

DMC components: Maintenance through routines / Retrospective appraisal (practical)

As the program progressed, the participant increasingly sought practice opportunities outside the classroom. She no longer saw English only as a lesson subject; it became

a tool for acting in the community. In the later interviews she described a shift from avoiding interaction to looking for chances to talk:

“Now I want to talk. At work I try to explain things to new staff. Before, I hid in the corner. Now I think: this is my place too, I must speak.” (I - S46)

Her diaries show how she used AI plus classroom preparation to support these actions:

“I checked some phrases with Pi, then I went to the shop to practice. I was so tired after work, but I wanted to test my list. The cashier understood me. I came back home smiling.” (R - S53)

Observation notes during the later period confirm this increased agency:

“Learner reports going alone to government office and bank without help. She prepares key sentences in class, rehearses with Pi, then uses them in real context. Returns to class with concrete stories and visible pride.” (O - S75)

These examples show that motivation moved into daily practice. The learner did not only study in class; she applied the language in many real situations. She routinely used English to manage everyday life, such as shopping, banking, and school communication, to build and maintain social interactions with the target community, and to join workplace communication. This pattern fits a DMC-like process where behavioral routines generalize from the protected learning environment to the wider community.

Theme 5 - Regaining Independence: Functional Outcomes Beyond the Classroom

DMC components: Long-term outcome / Retrospective evaluation

Although no standard language test was used at the end of the study, multiple data sources indicate substantial functional change. At the beginning, the participant described herself as almost unable to introduce or describe herself in English. She depended on others, i.e., family members, agents, staff, to handle most language-based tasks. In the final interview, she evaluated her position very differently:

“English is not my enemy now. I am not perfect, but I am not afraid of it anymore. I can go anywhere alone. I can manage my life here.” (I - S120)

Several concrete outcomes support this self-evaluation:

- She reported completing all required post-migration formalities, i.e., documents, appointments, school issues, without needing another person to speak for her.
- She attended and passed mandatory workplace training courses, delivered entirely in English, and successfully obtained the required certificates.

- She was able to attend a job interview in her own professional field and was offered a position related to her previous expertise.

These achievements were consistently mentioned in diaries and interviews, and corroborated in observation notes:

“Learner reports passing all workplace training modules in English and receiving certificates. She emphasizes that no help was allowed during the tests. Describes this as a turning point in her confidence.” (O - S118)

Her own and the teacher-researcher’s evaluations converged on one key point: although her English was “not perfect”, language was no longer a major barrier to daily functioning. Instead of avoiding situations, she approached them with prepared phrases, rehearsal with Pi, and a belief that she could cope.

In DMC terms, Theme 5 reflects a strong retrospective appraisal: the learner sees a clear before/after contrast in her life in the host country. The long-term motivational current is visible not only in her narrative but also in her increased independence and sustained use of English in high-stakes contexts.

Synthesis and Links to the Research Questions

The five themes together provide a coherent picture of the participant’s DMC-related experience across the two-year AI-assisted Study Abroad program.

RQ1 - How does the learner perceive her DMC-related motivational experience?

She experiences it as a practical, life-changing process: starting from a survival-based trigger, supported by clear structure and many small steps, marked by emotional ups and downs, and ending in a sense of regained independence. Her own words describe a move from “everything is locked because of English” to “I can manage my life here.”

RQ2 - How does the learner perceive changes in her motivational engagement over time?

Her engagement changes from anxious, hesitant participation in early sessions to structured, opportunistic practice and active community use. Motometer traces, diaries, and observations show that with time she recovers more quickly from low points, seeks out real-life interactions, and evaluates herself as capable of coping with everyday and professional demands in English. In the Discussion section, these findings are related to existing DMC theory and used to argue how an online Study Abroad framework, supported by a simple AI practice partner, can help adult migrants build and sustain a

Directed Motivational Current in their host-country language.

5. Discussion

This study set out to explore one adult migrant learner's long-term motivational experience during a two-year, AI-assisted online English program framed by the Study Abroad DMC framework. By following Maria across 120 sessions and multiple data sources, the study offered a detailed picture of how a Directed Motivational Current can start from an urgent life need, develop through structure and emotional support, and lead to greater communicative independence in the host country. In this section, the main findings are interpreted in relation to DMC literature and the broader dynamic view of motivation.

5.1. From urgent survival need to evolving DMC

Dörnyei and colleagues (2016) describe DMCs as powerful, long-term currents of motivation organized around a clear, valued goal and supported by structure and routines. In many published accounts, this valued goal is linked to an "ideal L2 self" or to a long-term educational or professional dream. In the present case, however, the initial trigger was more immediate and survival-oriented: the need to stay in the host country, find work, and manage daily life in English.

Maria did not begin with a romantic or idealized vision of herself as an English speaker. She spoke about English as a barrier that locks everything and as her "Achilles' heel". Yet this very pressure created a strong, concrete vision: to be able to handle life in English without help. The findings suggest that a DMC can be initiated not only by aspirational images but also by high-stakes practical needs, as long as the learner sees the goal as both important and, with support, ultimately attainable. This extends the DMC discussion by showing that survival-based visions may also serve as powerful starting points for sustained motivational currents in migrant contexts.

5.2. The central role of structure: making the current manageable

DMC theory highlights the importance of a salient facilitative structure, clear pathways, visible progress markers, and routines that channel effort over time. The present study confirms and deepens this point. Maria's engagement did not grow simply because she wanted to succeed. It grew because the program translated her broad survival vision into many small, manageable actions.

Weekly checklists, ESA-style lesson design, and five-minute task blocks helped to break down large communicative challenges into concrete steps. Motometer

marking every five minutes provided an additional layer of structure, allowing both learner and teacher-researcher to see when motivation dipped and when tasks felt productive (See Appendix A). Over time, these design elements reduced the sense of chaos that often accompanies migration and early adjustment. They helped Maria to perceive progress not as a vague hope, but as something she could track session by session.

In this sense, the study supports previous claims that structure is not a luxury but a core condition for DMCs. It also suggests that in online and migrant settings, structure must be both pedagogical, clear micro-tasks, and temporal, regular sessions, weekly routines, so that learners can rebuild a sense of control over their learning and their new lives.

5.3. Emotion, micro-successes, and AI-supported confidence

Another key element in DMC accounts is positive emotionality: feelings of progress, satisfaction, and meaning that feedback into the current and keep it going. The data in this study show how fragile and yet powerful these emotions can be. Maria often arrived tired and doubtful, but micro-successes, such as completing a phone call, managing a bank interaction, and being understood at work, reenergized her energy.

Here the AI tool, Pi, played a specific and limited but important role. Pi did not act as a teacher or an evaluator; it served as a low-risk rehearsal partner. By practicing phrases with Pi before real interactions, Maria could reduce anxiety and increase her sense of preparedness. When real conversations then went reasonably well, she reported feeling "brave" and "like a real person here". Motometer curves frequently showed dips during difficult tasks, followed by sharp rises after these small wins.

These findings underline that emotional reinforcement in DMCs does not come only from big achievements such as exams or certificates. In migrant life, small, everyday successes, successfully calling an office, managing a shop interaction, can be equally or even more important. The study also suggests that simple AI tools, used carefully, can increase the frequency of such micro-successes by supporting rehearsal and reducing immediate social risk.

5.4. From classroom participation to communicative agency

A further contribution of this study lies in how it documents the movement from classroom-focused effort to wider communicative agency. At the beginning of the program, Maria avoided interaction and depended on others to handle language-based tasks.

By the end, she reported intentionally seeking opportunities to speak in shops, at work, and in

community settings. She prepared with checklists and Pi, acted in real contexts, and then brought those experiences back into class for reflection.

This pattern fits the Study Abroad framework's emphasis on linking classroom tasks to real-life communicative demands. However, unlike traditional physical study abroad, the present program took place online and in the learner's new country of residence. The abroad element was not a temporary visit but her real, permanent environment. The study therefore illustrates how a Study Abroad-style DMC can be created and sustained in an online format, provided that classroom tasks are systematically tied to the learner's actual community needs.

Maria's functional outcomes strengthen this interpretation. Although she did not take a standard end-of-course language test, she was able to complete all required post-migration procedures without language mediation, pass mandatory workplace training in English, and obtain a job in her own professional field. Her own and her teacher's evaluations converged on the idea that English was no longer a major barrier. In DMC terms, this points to a strong, positive retrospective appraisal: the learner sees a clear before and after in her life, not only in her feelings but in what she can actually do.

5.5. Methodological reflections: depth, triangulation, and limits

Methodologically, the study shows the value and limits of an in-depth single-case design. The combination of different datasets, i.e., interviews, diaries, teacher observations, motometer traces, and AI-supported practice logs, could provide a rich, layered view of one learner's learning journey. Triangulation on these datasets helped to avoid over-reliance on any single narrative. For example, motometer peaks and drops were interpreted only when supported by diary comments or observation notes, and interview themes were checked through member checking and peer review of coding.

At the same time, the single-case design means that the findings are not statistically generalizable. The goal here was to offer an analytically rich description that can inform theory-building and help practitioners design similar programs. The study does not claim to isolate the separate "effects" of AI, structure, or the Study Abroad framework in a causal way. Instead, it presents them as parts of a coherent pedagogical package that, in this particular case, supported a DMC-like process.

5.6. Answering the research questions

Taken together, the findings allow us to answer the two research questions clearly: For RQ1, the learner perceives her DMC-related motivational experience as a life-

changing process. It began from a strong survival need, moved through structured and emotionally supported learning, and resulted in increased independence and self-trust in the host-country language. She does not describe her journey in abstract theoretical terms, but in concrete contrasts: from being "locked out" of society to being able to "manage life" in English.

For RQ2, her motivational engagement changed from anxious, hesitant participation to structured, opportunistic practice in real contexts. Early engagement was fragile and easily disturbed. Over time, as structures and micro-successes accumulated, she took more initiative, actively sought interaction, and evaluated herself as capable of coping with professional and everyday demands. The DMC in this case is visible not only in her effort inside the virtual classroom but also in her repeated, self-initiated actions in the community.

In a nutshell, this study suggests the idea of an AI-assisted, online Study Abroad framework can support a DMC-like process for an adult migrant learner provided that the three required conditions are met. The pre-conditions are the major traits of DMC, i.e., having a personally meaningful and urgent trigger, building clear facilitative structures with setting proximal goals, and being supported opportunities to act in real-life situations. These insights can inform the design of future programs for migrants, and also other EFL adult learners, who need to build sustained motivation.

6. Conclusion

This longitudinal single-case study followed one adult migrant learner, Maria, across two years of AI-assisted online English learning, framed by the Study Abroad DMC framework. The findings showed that a powerful, long-term motivational process can begin from an urgent, practical need rather than from an idealized future self. For Maria, the trigger was the need to manage life, work, and formal procedures in the host country. Over time, this initial fear-driven pressure was transformed into a more stable sense of agency and confidence in real communicative situations.

The study suggests that three conditions worked together to support a DMC-like process in this online setting. First, the learner had a personally meaningful and high-stakes goal, i.e., staying, working, and living independently. Second, the program provided clear facilitative structures, i.e., short, ESA-based tasks, weekly checklists, and regular reflection. All were organized around proximal goals that linked classroom work to real community needs. Third, frequent, supported practice opportunities, both through AI-assisted rehearsal and through real-life interactions, created many small wins that reinforced motivation. Motometer traces, interviews, diaries, and observations converged to show how

emotional dips could be followed by renewed effort after these micro-successes.

Pedagogically, the study indicates that teachers teaching online can adapt the Study Abroad framework if they provide three conditions, i.e., connecting learning process in urgent, realistic goals, designing visible step-by-step structures, and integrating simple AI tools as the practicing partners rather than teacher replacements. When learners are trained to use AI for quick practice before real encounters, classroom work, technology, and community life can form a coherent motivational system.

At the same time, the study has clear limits. It reports on one learner in one context, and it does not isolate the separate effects of AI, structure, or framework design. The outcomes are also described and analyzed mainly in terms of the participant as a user, i.e., what Maria could do in her daily and professional life, rather than through standardized tests. Therefore, future DMC-based research should examine larger groups, different age ranges, and other proficiency levels. In the same line, they should compare AI-assisted programs with non-AI alternatives. Group-level DMCs versus individual-level DMCs need to be compared within the same classroom dynamics, especially in online or hybrid Study Abroad designs. Even with these limits, this case offers a detailed example of how structure, emotion, and supported practice can turn a survival need into a sustained motivational current in real life.

Authors Contribution

All the authors have participated sufficiently in the intellectual content, conception, and design of this work or the analysis and interpretation of the data (when applicable), as well as the writing of the manuscript.

Availability of data and materials

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Conflict of interest

The author states that there is no conflict of interest.

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Appendix A

Sample Instruments

A1. Initial Semi-structured Interview Questions (needs-analysis phase)

Participant (pseudonym): Maria

Interview ID: Transcript - S1

Session: Initial needs analysis (first meeting)

Date: September 2023

Interviewer / Researcher: Teacher-researcher

Format: Semi-structured; some selected questions and participant responses (initial conditions focus).

Q1: Tell me briefly about your situation and why you contacted me for lessons now.

Q2: What has been your experience learning English so far?

Q3: How do you feel when you have to speak English with strangers or in official places (bank, workplace)?

Q4: What are your most important goals for learning English in the short term?

Q5: How do you see your own strengths and barriers right now?

Q6: What sort of support or activities do you think would help you most at the start?

A2. Sample Teacher-as-Researcher Observation Sheet (one session)

Session: 3

Date: September 2023

Observer: Researcher / Teacher

Duration: 45 minutes

Context: Online lesson (Google Meet) - Study Abroad framework tasks (warm-up, controlled practice, role-play, reflection).

A3. Sample Weekly Reflective Diary Entry

Participant: Maria (pseudonym)

Week: Week 5 (Oct 2023) submitted electronically

Activity (time)	Participant behavior & engagement	Researcher notes / actions
Warm-up (0-5 min)	Attentive but visibly tense; pauses before speaking	Gave gentle prompts; used simple questions to reduce anxiety
Controlled task (5-15 min)	Repeated model phrases; asked for repetition	Introduced Pi simulation before role-play
Role-play: ordering food (15-25 min)	Hesitant at first; corrected mid-utterance; succeeded in final attempt	Practiced twice; short debrief after second attempt
Communicative activation (25-35 min)	Tried longer turns with prompts; some grammatical errors	Teacher provided scaffolding and rehearsal plans
Reflection & diary prompt (35-45 min)	Shared feelings: frustration + hope; agreed next small goals	Assigned Pi practice and checklist items for the week

Practice log (this week):

- 10 minutes daily Pi practice (short dialogues)
- Two role-plays in class: bank and shop dialogues
- One attempted interaction with neighbor (greeting only)

Feelings / reflections:

- Day 1: Very nervous before class; felt stuck in speaking.
- Day 3: After practicing with Pi, I could say the required phrase at the shop. I felt proud.
- Day 5: Tired due to work, but seeing completed checklist items kept me going.

Self-rating (weekly overall): 6/10 >>> improvement from previous week.

A4. Sample Composite Data Display Chart including motometers and observation data sets

Session: 19 & 38

Date: Nov. 2023 & Jun. 2024

Duration: 50 minutes

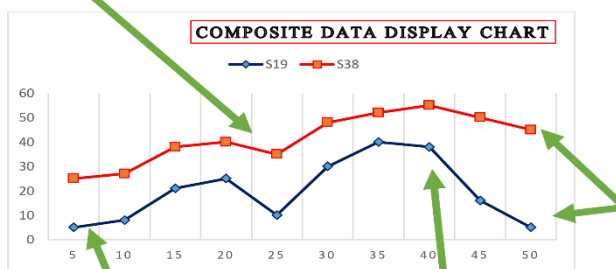
Instrument: Motometer & Observation

Motometers of session 19 (S19: in blue color) and session 38 (S38: in red color) are analyzed here. The former is related to the time the online class was recently started, and the latter is related to almost two months later. According to the teacher-as-researcher observation notes and insights some critical points were addressed here. By applying an appraisal look to these data sets, a genuine picture of the reasons behind the fluctuation of the participant is revealed through the composite data display chart.

Note: Motometer data are treated as momentary subjective indicators and interpreted alongside diaries and observation notes (not used as psychometric scores).

Short goal for next week: Use Pi to rehearse 2 polite phone opening phrases; try to use one phrase in a real phone call.

This point was in the Study part of the ESA lesson model. At this point, the participant was given an independent task based on what had been taught or practiced. According to the chart, a meaningful decline happened in both S19 and S38, as she got stressed when it came to her turn to take the responsibility. The point here is that, in S38, it was still stressful to her, but she could handle it; while there is a sharp decline in S19, as she was not accustomed to such activities at that time, and she even answered the ICQs with long pauses. Although she could understand the spotlighted point, she showed hesitation in responding to the task.



This point referred to the first time span in motometers, i.e., after passing five minutes of the online class. In S19, it was related to the *Engagement* part of the ESA lesson model. It did not trigger any upsurge. She did not observe any significant change. She could not fulfill any proximal goals set before. She was not focused. On the other hand, in S38, the level of motivation was significantly higher at the initial point. At the time, she could fulfill some proximal goals, such as going shopping alone, applying for a simple general job, and greeting neighbors with a low level of shyness. So the emergence of having routines and staying focused was noticed.

This point referred to almost the end of the *Activation* part of the ESA lesson Model. She expressed the highest level of experiencing motivation in both sessions. This trend happened in most of the motometers' graphs because she learned something during the session, and in the activation part, she generated some meaningful sentences. She proved that she could learn new things.

This was the end of the session, and the delayed correction part was finished. There was a decline in both graphs. She got disappointed once the teacher started to correct her. Not because she was proud or something; actually, she considered the corrections as the sign of weakness. But the point here is that, despite this trend was almost repeated in most of the motometer graphs, the amount of her motivation decline became rather less because she got more engaged in language learning practices in the target community, so the corrections were being considered as a sign of learning.