

"From Rote Memorization to Self-Directed Learning: A Longitudinal Study of Montessori's Impact on EFL Motivation in Uzbek Adolescents"

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Annotation

This study investigates the effectiveness of the Montessori method in enhancing motivation and English language proficiency among Uzbek high school students, contrasting it with traditional rote memorization approaches. Conducted over two academic years (2022–2024) in Tashkent, the research employed a mixed-methods design involving 60 students (30 Montessori, 30 control). Quantitative data from motivation surveys (AMS) and CEFR-aligned language tests, alongside qualitative insights from interviews and classroom observations, revealed that Montessori students exhibited a 35% increase in intrinsic motivation and a 22% improvement in speaking skills. Challenges included curriculum misalignment and resource scarcity. The findings advocate for integrating Montessori principles into Uzbekistan's educational reforms to foster psychological autonomy and global competence.

Keywords: Montessori method, EFL motivation, self-directed learning, educational reforms, psychological self-construction, Uzbekistan.

The modern educational system in Uzbekistan, like many post-Soviet countries, has historically relied on rote memorization, particularly in foreign language instruction [1]. Rooted in Soviet-era pedagogical traditions, classrooms prioritize textbook-based drills, grammatical accuracy, and standardized testing, often at the expense of critical thinking and communicative competence. For instance, a 2020 Ministry of Education report noted that 78% of EFL lessons in Uzbek high schools focus on grammar rules and vocabulary lists, with limited opportunities for speaking or creative expression [2]. This approach, while ensuring alignment with national exams, has led to widespread student disengagement. Surveys conducted in 2022 revealed that only 32% of Uzbek adolescents found English classes "interesting," citing monotony and pressure to memorize rather than understand [3].

President Shavkat Mirziyoyev's educational reforms (2017–2024) explicitly call for a shift toward student-centered pedagogies, emphasizing "innovation, creativity, and global competitiveness" [4]. However, systemic inertia—such as teacher resistance,

rigid curricula, and a lack of training in alternative methods—has slowed progress. For example, a pilot program introducing project-based learning in 2021 faced backlash from instructors accustomed to traditional lecturing, with 65% reporting discomfort with reduced classroom control [5]. Within this context, the Montessori method emerges as a radical yet understudied solution, particularly for adolescent EFL learners.

The Montessori method, developed by Maria Montessori in the early 20th century, is rooted in principles of autonomy, sensitive periods, and prepared environments [6]. Unlike traditional systems, it views education as a process of "self-construction," where children actively build knowledge through interaction with thoughtfully designed materials and peer collaboration. Key elements include:

Autonomy: Students choose activities aligned with their developmental stage and interests, fostering ownership of learning.

Prepared Environment: Classrooms are equipped with self-correcting materials (e.g., movable alphabets, grammar symbol boxes) that enable independent exploration.

Mixed-Age Collaboration: Adolescents mentor younger peers, reinforcing their own skills while developing empathy and leadership [7].

In EFL contexts, these principles translate into dynamic practices. For example, sandpaper letters allow tactile reinforcement of phonics, while project-based tasks—such as creating English-language podcasts about Uzbek culture—contextualize vocabulary and grammar. Mixed-age discussions simulate real-world communication, where fluency matters more than perfection [8]. Crucially, the method aligns with Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, emphasizing social interaction and scaffolding as drivers of language acquisition [9].

The experimental phase of this study was conducted over two academic years (2022–2024) in two public high schools in Tashkent, selected for their comparable demographics and resources. The Montessori group (n=30, ages 14–16) engaged in:

Project-Based Learning: Students designed initiatives like "Global Uzbek Youth," a blog featuring interviews with international students, requiring research, writing, and video editing in English.

Montessori Materials: Grammar boxes were used to deconstruct sentence structures, while role-playing activities (e.g., simulating travel scenarios) built conversational fluency.

Peer Mentoring: Older students (16-year-olds) coached younger peers (14-year-olds) on presentation skills, fostering cross-age collaboration.

In contrast, the control group (n=30) followed Uzbekistan's standard EFL curriculum:

Daily grammar drills from state-approved textbooks.

Vocabulary quizzes requiring memorization of 20–30 words weekly.

Biweekly standardized tests aligned with national exam formats.

Quantitative results revealed striking contrasts between the groups:

Intrinsic Motivation: Using the Academic Motivation Scale (AMS), Montessori students' intrinsic motivation scores rose from 2.8 to 4.1 (5-point scale), driven by curiosity and enjoyment. The control group showed minimal change (3.0–3.2), with 70% citing "fear of poor grades" as their primary motivator [10].

Language Proficiency:

Speaking: 68% of Montessori students achieved CEFR B1 (e.g., describing experiences and opinions fluently), versus 46% in the control group.

Writing: Montessori learners improved by 18% in coherence and creativity, attributed to project-based tasks like blog writing.

Listening: No significant difference, as both groups used similar audio resources [11].

Qualitative insights from interviews and journals further illuminated these outcomes: A 15-year-old participant shared: "Before, English felt like math—just rules. Now I interview tourists near Registan Square and help them navigate. It's scary but exciting!"

Teachers observed increased metacognition: "Students analyze their errors using grammar symbols instead of waiting for me to correct them" [12].

Journals highlighted emotional growth: "I used to panic during speeches. Now I practice with my mentor, and it's getting easier" (Student Journal, 2023).

However, implementation faced significant challenges:

Curriculum Misalignment: National exams prioritize rote knowledge (e.g., verb conjugation tables), conflicting with Montessori's focus on process. For example, 40% of Montessori teachers reported "stress" when reconciling project work with exam preparation [13].

Resource Gaps: Locally produced Montessori materials were scarce. Teachers improvised by crafting grammar boxes from cardboard and repurposing cultural artifacts (e.g., traditional Uzbek textiles for vocabulary lessons).

Cultural Hesitation: Parents initially resisted the lack of homework and grades. One remarked: "How will my child get into university without test scores?" [14].

Workshops explaining Montessori's long-term benefits gradually eased concerns, with 60% of parents endorsing the method by 2024 [15].

These findings underscore the transformative potential of Montessori pedagogy in EFL contexts, while highlighting the need for systemic support to sustain innovation in Uzbekistan's evolving educational landscape.

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