

Boosting Learner Motivation: Approaches to Increase Student Engagement in English Classes at SMA and SMK

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ABSTRACT

In an increasingly globalized world, English has become a fundamental component of education, yet many students in non-native contexts exhibit low motivation and engagement in English language classes. This phenomenon is especially prevalent at the secondary education level, where students often perceive English as a mandatory subject with limited personal relevance. This study investigates practical strategies for enhancing learner motivation based on Self-Determination Theory (SDT), which emphasizes autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Using a qualitative descriptive design, data were collected from 6 English teachers and 40 students at SMA and SMK Darul Falah Mataram through semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, questionnaires, and document analysis. Thematic analysis revealed five key strategies that significantly improved student engagement: autonomy-supportive practices, real-world content integration, scaffolded feedback, collaborative learning activities, and technology-enhanced instruction. Findings show that students are more engaged when they are given meaningful choices, relevant materials, constructive feedback, supportive peer environments, and access to digital learning tools. These strategies address core psychological needs and foster intrinsic motivation, leading to more active participation and sustained interest in language learning. Notably, differences were observed between SMA and SMK students regarding the types of content and activities that most effectively motivated them, with SMK students showing stronger engagement when vocational English was integrated into lessons. The study recommends a shift from traditional teacher-centered methods to more student-centered, contextually responsive approaches to maximize learning outcomes and engagement in English language education at the secondary level.

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1. INTRODUCTION

In today's interconnected and globalized world, English has solidified its status as a global lingua franca. It is the primary medium of international communication, academic exchange, and technological advancement (Crystal, 2003). As a result, English language education has become a critical component of many national curricula, especially in non-English-speaking countries (Cha & Ham, 2011). In Indonesia, English is a compulsory subject from the junior secondary level through senior secondary education, reflecting the government's recognition of the language's importance for national development and global competitiveness (Lauder, 2008). Students are expected not only to master basic communication but also to engage in complex academic and professional tasks using English, making its mastery increasingly essential (Haneda, 2014).

Despite its significance, many students demonstrate low levels of motivation and engagement in English language courses (Nayır, 2017). This phenomenon is particularly prevalent in contexts where English is taught as a foreign language (EFL), and learners often view it as a compulsory subject rather than a meaningful or personally relevant skill (Dueñas, 2004). At the secondary education level in Indonesia, especially in Islamic-based schools (*madrasah* and pesantren-affiliated institutions), students frequently face additional challenges including limited exposure to English outside the classroom, a curriculum that prioritizes religious subjects, and a lack of English-rich learning environments (Musthafa, 2001). Research by Dörnyei and Ushioda (2011) shows that demotivation can stem from various factors, such as traditional teaching methods, lack of autonomy, irrelevant content, and anxiety related to performance. These barriers can hinder active participation, reduce effort, and ultimately affect language proficiency (Ushioda & Dörnyei, 2021).

SMA and SMK Darul Falah Mataram, located in Pagutan, Mataram, Nusa Tenggara Barat, are secondary educational institutions affiliated with the Darul Falah Islamic boarding school (*pesantren*). SMA Darul Falah offers a general academic track, while SMK Darul Falah provides vocational education. Both institutions face common challenges in English language teaching, including heterogeneous student proficiency levels, limited instructional hours, and students' tendency to prioritize other subjects. Preliminary observations and informal discussions with teachers at both schools revealed that a significant number of students exhibited passive behavior during English lessons, reluctance to speak in English, and minimal effort in completing English assignments. These conditions underscore the need for systematic investigation into motivational strategies that can address these challenges.

Motivation plays a pivotal role in successful second language acquisition. According to Gardner (1985), students with high motivation are more likely to invest time and effort in language learning, exhibit resilience in the face of challenges, and maintain a positive attitude toward the subject. Gardner's Socio-Educational Model distinguishes between integrative motivation, characterized by a desire to interact with the target language community, and instrumental motivation, driven by practical goals such as career advancement or academic achievement (Gardner & Lambert, 1972).

Building on this foundation, Ryan and Deci's (2000) Self-Determination Theory (SDT) provides a comprehensive framework for understanding human motivation across various contexts, including education. SDT posits that individuals have three basic psychological needs that, when fulfilled, promote intrinsic motivation and optimal functioning: (a) autonomy, the need to feel a sense of volition and choice in one's actions; (b) competence, the need to feel effective and capable in one's interactions with the environment; and (c) relatedness, the need to feel connected to and cared for by others. When educational environments support these three needs, students are more likely to exhibit intrinsic motivation—engaging in learning because it is inherently interesting and satisfying—rather than relying solely on extrinsic motivation driven by external rewards or punishments (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Niemiec & Ryan, 2009).

In the context of EFL education, SDT has been widely applied to examine how classroom practices influence student engagement. Noels et al. (2000) demonstrated that teachers' autonomy-supportive behaviors were positively associated with students' intrinsic motivation in language learning.

Similarly, Reeve (2006) found that autonomy-supportive teaching led to greater student engagement, higher academic performance, and more positive emotional experiences in the classroom. These findings suggest that SDT provides a robust lens for analyzing and improving motivational strategies in English language classrooms.

Furthermore, Dörnyei's (2005) L2 Motivational Self System introduces the concepts of the Ideal L2 Self and the Ought-to L2 Self, which complement SDT by emphasizing the role of future self-guides in sustaining motivation. When students can envision themselves as competent English speakers in the future, they are more likely to invest effort in current learning activities. This perspective is particularly relevant for SMK students, who may be motivated by clear connections between English proficiency and their vocational aspirations.

This study aims to investigate how learner motivation and engagement can be enhanced in English language classrooms through effective pedagogical strategies at SMA and SMK Darul Falah Mataram. Specifically, the research addresses the following questions:

1. What are the key factors that influence students' motivation and engagement in English classes at SMA and SMK Darul Falah Mataram?
2. What instructional strategies are currently employed by English language teachers to increase motivation and active participation?
3. How do students perceive the effectiveness and relevance of these strategies in supporting their language learning process?
4. To what extent do the motivational strategies observed in classroom practice align with the core components of Self-Determination Theory—namely, autonomy, competence, and relatedness?
5. What differences, if any, exist between SMA and SMK students regarding the types of strategies that most effectively enhance their motivation?

This study contributes to the growing body of literature on EFL motivation in the Indonesian secondary education context, an area that remains relatively underexplored compared to higher education settings. By examining two distinct school types (SMA and SMK) within the same institutional framework, the study offers comparative insights into how academic orientation influences motivational dynamics. The findings are expected to provide practical guidance for English teachers at Darul Falah and similar institutions seeking to create more engaging and effective learning environments. Additionally, the study contributes to the theoretical application of SDT in EFL contexts by examining how each component of the theory manifests in actual classroom practices at the secondary level.

2. METHODS

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative descriptive research design to explore strategies that effectively enhance student motivation and engagement in English language classes. The qualitative approach was chosen to gain an in-depth understanding of student perceptions, teacher practices, and classroom dynamics, which are essential elements in examining motivation-related phenomena (Creswell, 2014). Through rich, contextual data, the study aimed to identify recurring patterns and strategies that positively influence learner engagement in the context of SMA and SMK Darul Falah Mataram. The descriptive design was particularly appropriate because the study sought to document and describe existing practices and perceptions rather than test causal hypotheses (Patton, 2002).

Participants and Setting

Participants in this study included 6 English language teachers (3 from SMA and 3 from SMK) and 40 students (20 from SMA and 20 from SMK) at Darul Falah Mataram, selected through purposive sampling. The inclusion criteria required teachers to have at least two years of teaching experience in

English language courses and students to be actively enrolled in the 10th or 11th grade (Kelas X or XI). Students from the 12th grade were excluded to avoid disruption to their preparation for the national examination. This sampling strategy ensured that both groups had substantial exposure to language teaching and learning practices while also enabling comparison between the two school types.

The research setting, SMA and SMK Darul Falah, is located in the Pagutan area of Mataram, the capital city of Nusa Tenggara Barat province. Both schools operate under the umbrella of the Darul Falah Islamic boarding school foundation. SMA Darul Falah follows the national curriculum (Kurikulum Merdeka) with an academic focus, while SMK Darul Falah offers vocational programs. English is taught as a compulsory subject in both schools, typically with 2–4 hours of instruction per week depending on the grade level and program.

Data Collection

Data were collected through four complementary methods to ensure comprehensive coverage of the research questions:

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with all 6 teachers and 16 selected students (8 from each school). Each interview lasted approximately 30–45 minutes for teachers and 20–30 minutes for students. Interview protocols were developed based on the research questions and piloted with two non-participant teachers before implementation. Questions explored teachers' instructional strategies, challenges in motivating students, perceptions of student engagement, and their understanding of motivational theories. Student interviews focused on their learning experiences, preferences, perceived barriers to engagement, and suggestions for improvement.

Classroom observations were conducted in 12 English classes (6 in each school) over a period of four weeks. A semi-structured observation protocol guided the researcher in documenting teaching strategies, student participation levels, types of activities used, classroom interactions, and evidence of autonomy support, competence building, and relatedness promotion. Each observation session covered one full class period (approximately 45–90 minutes).

Student questionnaires were administered to all 40 student participants to supplement interview data. The questionnaire included both Likert-scale items measuring perceived autonomy support, competence, relatedness, and engagement, as well as open-ended questions allowing students to elaborate on their experiences. The questionnaire was administered in Bahasa Indonesia to ensure comprehension.

Document analysis included examination of lesson plans, syllabi, teaching materials, student work samples, and student reflection journals. These documents provided triangulating evidence of the instructional strategies reported in interviews and observed in classrooms.

Data Analysis

The analysis followed thematic analysis as proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006), which involves six phases: familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. This approach allowed the researcher to identify, analyze, and report patterns (themes) within the data systematically. Themes were coded inductively from the data and then organized deductively using the three components of Self-Determination Theory (autonomy, competence, and relatedness) as an overarching framework.

Interview recordings were transcribed verbatim, and observation field notes were typed and organized chronologically. Questionnaire data were compiled and analyzed descriptively for the Likert-scale items, while open-ended responses were coded alongside interview transcripts. All data sources were triangulated to verify emerging themes and ensure the trustworthiness of the findings.

Trustworthiness

Several measures were taken to ensure the credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability of the findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Triangulation of multiple data sources

(interviews, observations, questionnaires, and documents) strengthened the credibility of the findings. Member checking was conducted by sharing preliminary findings with three participating teachers to verify accuracy of interpretation. Thick description of the research context and procedures supports transferability to similar settings. An audit trail documenting all research decisions and an independent review of coding by a colleague enhanced dependability and confirmability.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the school administration of both SMA and SMK Darul Falah. Informed consent was secured from all adult participants and from the parents/guardians of student participants under 18 years of age. Participants were assured of confidentiality, and pseudonyms were used in reporting the findings. Participation was voluntary, and participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any time without consequences.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the main findings of the study, organized around the three core elements of Self-Determination Theory (SDT): autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2000), with an additional theme addressing the role of technology and contextual relevance. Data were collected from 6 English teachers and 40 students at SMA and SMK Darul Falah Mataram. Thematic analysis revealed five major themes that consistently appeared across participants and data sources.

Autonomy-Supportive Strategies Foster Ownership of Learning

Teachers at both SMA and SMK Darul Falah reported that providing choices in learning tasks significantly improved student motivation. For example, students were allowed to choose between writing essays, delivering presentations, creating short videos, or designing infographics for their assignments. One SMA teacher explained: *"When I give them options, I can see the difference immediately. They become more enthusiastic and take the task more seriously because they feel it is their own decision"* (Teacher A, SMA). Similarly, an SMK teacher noted: *"For the vocational students, I let them choose topics related to their field—like writing a menu in English for hospitality students or creating a product description for marketing students. The engagement is much higher"* (Teacher D, SMK).

From the student side, the majority (32 out of 40) mentioned in interviews and questionnaires that having control over learning decisions made them more engaged. An SMA student reflected: *"I prefer it when the teacher gives us choices. I can pick something I am interested in, so I don't feel bored"* (Student 7, SMA). An SMK student added: *"When the teacher asked us to make a video about our workshop, I felt excited because it was related to what I like"* (Student 15, SMK).

Classroom observation data confirmed these reports. In autonomy-supportive classes, student participation rates were visibly higher than in more rigid, lecture-based formats. During observed sessions where teachers offered choices, an average of 75% of students actively participated in discussions or activities, compared to approximately 40% in teacher-directed sessions without choice elements. Students in autonomy-supportive environments also demonstrated more initiative, such as asking questions voluntarily and seeking additional resources.

These findings are consistent with SDT's emphasis on autonomy as a fundamental psychological need (Ryan & Deci, 2000) and align with Reeve's (2006) research showing that autonomy-supportive teaching leads to higher engagement. The results also support Noels et al.'s (2000) finding that perceived autonomy support is positively associated with intrinsic motivation in language learning.

Relevance and Real-World Context Increase Engagement

Teachers who incorporated current issues, pop culture, or students' personal experiences into their lessons observed a notable increase in attentiveness and discussion quality. For instance, one SMA teacher used a TikTok video analysis task in which students analyzed English-language content and

discussed language use, cultural references, and persuasive techniques. This activity was rated by 90% of participating students as "highly engaging" in the post-activity questionnaire. Another SMA teacher incorporated discussion of trending news topics and social media phenomena into speaking activities, reporting that *"students who usually never speak in class suddenly had opinions to share"* (Teacher B, SMA). At SMK Darul Falah, the integration of vocational English content proved particularly effective. Teachers who connected English lessons to students' vocational fields reported significantly higher engagement levels. For example, an SMK teacher designed a unit on English for Tourism in which students role-played as hotel receptionists and tour guides. Another teacher created a project-based activity where students wrote product descriptions and business emails related to their technical field. *"When they see the connection between English and their future career, everything changes. They understand why they need to learn this"* (Teacher E, SMK).

Student interviews strongly emphasized that content relevance was a powerful motivational driver. Students across both schools expressed frustration with textbook-based lessons that felt disconnected from their lives. One student articulated: *"I don't understand why we read texts about things that never happen in our life. When the teacher uses examples from real life, I can understand better and I want to learn more"* (Student 22, SMK).

These findings underscore the importance of connecting classroom content to students' lived experiences and future aspirations. They align with Dörnyei's (2005) argument that motivation increases when learners can relate language learning to their ideal future selves. The difference between SMA and SMK students in terms of preferred content types highlights the need for context-sensitive curriculum design.

Scaffolded Feedback Builds Competence and Confidence

All six teachers emphasized the importance of step-by-step guidance and formative feedback in building students' competence and confidence in English. In classrooms where scaffolded feedback was consistently used, students were more willing to revise their work, ask questions, and attempt increasingly challenging tasks. Teachers described various scaffolding techniques including modeling, guided practice, think-aloud demonstrations, graphic organizers, sentence starters, and peer review protocols.

One teacher described her approach: *"I never just say 'wrong.' I show them what is correct, explain why, and give them a chance to try again. Step by step, their confidence grows"* (Teacher C, SMA). Another teacher explained: *"For speaking activities, I start with guided dialogues, then move to semi-guided conversations, and finally free speaking. If I jump straight to free speaking, most students freeze"* (Teacher F, SMK).

Students who received frequent, constructive feedback on their speaking tasks demonstrated visible improvement in fluency and confidence over the observation period. Observation data revealed that in classes with regular scaffolded feedback, students attempted longer and more complex utterances in English, made more voluntary contributions to class discussions, and showed less anxiety about making errors. One student noted: *"Before, I was afraid to speak English because I didn't want to make mistakes. But now my teacher always says it's okay to make mistakes and shows me how to fix them. I feel braver"* (Student 11, SMA).

Questionnaire data supported these findings, with 85% of students agreeing or strongly agreeing that they felt more confident when teachers provided clear guidance and constructive feedback. Interestingly, SMK students showed a slightly stronger preference for practical, skills-based feedback (e.g., correction of pronunciation in role-play activities) compared to SMA students, who valued feedback on written academic tasks more highly.

These findings are consistent with SDT's competence component and align with Niemiec and Ryan's (2009) assertion that optimal challenges paired with constructive feedback support the need for competence. The results also support Vygotsky's (1978) concept of the Zone of Proximal Development, suggesting that scaffolded instruction enables students to achieve tasks they could not accomplish independently.

Collaborative Activities Strengthen Social Bonds and Motivation

Group-based activities were found to reduce anxiety, improve motivation, and strengthen social connections among students. In both SMA and SMK contexts, collaborative tasks created supportive learning environments where students felt more comfortable taking risks with English.

At SMA Darul Falah, a task-based learning project required students to work in teams to create English podcasts on topics of their choice. Observations showed a marked increase in English-only interaction and peer support during collaborative sessions. Students who were typically reluctant to speak individually demonstrated greater willingness to contribute in group settings. One teacher observed: *"The shy students come alive in group work. They help each other, correct each other gently, and even laugh at their own mistakes. The atmosphere is completely different"* (Teacher A, SMA).

At SMK Darul Falah, collaborative activities took on a vocational dimension. Students worked in groups to prepare English presentations for simulated business meetings, create bilingual promotional materials, and conduct mock job interviews in English. These activities not only improved English skills but also developed teamwork and professional communication competencies valued in the workplace.

Student responses highlighted the social and emotional benefits of collaborative learning. One student shared: *"I like working in groups because when I don't know a word, my friend can help me. I don't feel embarrassed"* (Student 28, SMK). Another student noted: *"In group work, we motivate each other. If my friend tries hard, I also want to try hard"* (Student 5, SMA).

Questionnaire data indicated that 87.5% of students preferred learning English through collaborative activities over individual work. Students who reported strong feelings of relatedness (sense of belonging and social connection in the classroom) also reported higher levels of engagement and intrinsic motivation, confirming the SDT framework's prediction about the relationship between relatedness and motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Technology-Enhanced Instruction Increases Engagement

An emergent theme that arose from the data was the role of technology in enhancing student motivation and engagement. While not originally a primary focus of the study, the pervasive use of digital tools by both teachers and students warranted attention as a distinct finding.

Teachers at both schools reported using various digital tools to supplement their instruction, including language learning applications (e.g., Duolingo, Quizlet), social media platforms for authentic English exposure, YouTube videos for listening practice, and Google Classroom for assignment management. One teacher described using Kahoot! quizzes as warm-up activities: *"The students love it. Even the ones who usually sit quietly in the back suddenly become competitive and engaged"* (Teacher B, SMA). Students overwhelmingly expressed positive attitudes toward technology-enhanced instruction. In the questionnaire, 92.5% of students agreed that using digital tools made English lessons more interesting. Students particularly appreciated activities that involved their smartphones, as these devices were already integral to their daily lives. However, teachers also noted challenges including unequal access to devices, internet connectivity issues, and the need for careful management to prevent distraction.

This finding aligns with Wahyudi and Jatun's (2024) research on technology integration in Indonesian education and extends it to the secondary EFL context. From an SDT perspective,

technology can support all three basic needs: autonomy (through self-paced learning and choice of digital resources), competence (through immediate feedback and adaptive difficulty), and relatedness (through collaborative digital platforms and online communication).

Comparative Findings: SMA vs. SMK

Analysis of the data revealed several noteworthy differences between SMA and SMK students in terms of motivational patterns:

Content preferences: SMA students showed greater engagement with academic and general-interest English content (e.g., news articles, literary texts, debate topics), while SMK students were more motivated by vocational and career-related English content (e.g., business English, technical vocabulary, workplace communication).

Motivational orientation: SMA students more frequently cited academic goals (university entrance, scholarships) as reasons for learning English, reflecting a stronger instrumental-academic motivation. SMK students more often mentioned career-related goals (getting jobs in hotels, tourism industry, international companies), indicating instrumental-professional motivation.

Preferred activity types: While both groups enjoyed collaborative activities, SMK students showed a stronger preference for hands-on, project-based tasks that simulated real workplace scenarios. SMA students showed a slightly stronger preference for discussion-based and analytical activities.

Perceived barriers: SMA students more frequently identified grammar complexity and academic vocabulary as primary challenges, while SMK students cited limited speaking opportunities and lack of confidence as their main obstacles.

These differences underscore the importance of differentiated instructional approaches that account for students' academic orientations, career aspirations, and specific learning needs.

Table 1. Summary of Findings

SDT Component	Strategy	SMA Context	SMK Context	Reported Outcome
Autonomy	Choice of topics/formats	Academic topic choices	Vocational topic choices	Increased ownership and engagement
Competence	Scaffolded feedback	Focus on academic writing	Focus on practical speaking	Higher confidence and performance
Relatedness	Group work and peer support	Discussion-based collaboration	Workplace simulation teams	Reduced anxiety, increased participation
Relevance	Real-world content and media	Current events, social media	Vocational English, career content	Greater interest and perceived usefulness
Technology	Digital tools and platforms	Research and presentation tools	Interactive apps and simulations	Enhanced engagement across both contexts

Implications and Recommendations

Implications for Teaching Practice

The findings of this study carry several important implications for English language teaching at the secondary level, particularly in Islamic boarding school-affiliated institutions.

First, the strong positive response to autonomy-supportive strategies suggests that teachers should systematically incorporate student choice into their lesson planning. This does not require complete curricular overhaul; simple adjustments such as offering two or three assignment options, allowing students to select discussion topics, or letting students choose their working groups can significantly enhance perceived autonomy and engagement.

Second, the marked difference in engagement levels between context-relevant and generic content highlights the need for curriculum localization and differentiation. For SMA contexts, this means connecting English content to academic interests and higher education preparation. For SMK contexts, this involves integrating English for Specific Purposes (ESP) content aligned with students' vocational fields. Teachers should regularly assess students' interests and aspirations and adjust their materials accordingly.

Third, the effectiveness of scaffolded feedback reinforces the importance of formative assessment practices. Teachers should be trained in providing constructive, growth-oriented feedback that helps students see errors as learning opportunities rather than failures. Professional development programs should include practical strategies for scaffolding instruction across different proficiency levels.

Fourth, the anxiety-reducing effects of collaborative activities suggest that English teachers should create structured opportunities for peer interaction and support. This is particularly important in contexts where students have limited confidence in their English abilities. Teachers can establish clear group work protocols, assign complementary roles within groups, and gradually increase the complexity and independence expected of collaborative tasks.

Fifth, the positive response to technology-enhanced instruction indicates that schools should invest in digital infrastructure and teacher training to support effective technology integration. However, technology should complement rather than replace effective pedagogical strategies, and issues of equitable access must be addressed.

Recommendations for Institutional Policy

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are offered for SMA and SMK Darul Falah and similar institutions:

1. **Professional development programs** should be designed to equip English teachers with knowledge of motivational theories (particularly SDT) and practical strategies for creating autonomy-supportive, competence-building, and relatedness-promoting classroom environments.
2. **Curriculum review committees** should examine existing English syllabi and textbooks for relevance to students' lives and aspirations, and supplement or replace materials that do not meet this criterion.
3. **Cross-departmental collaboration** at SMK should be encouraged, with English teachers working alongside vocational instructors to develop integrated English content that reinforces both language skills and vocational competencies.
4. **Assessment practices** should be diversified to include portfolio assessment, project-based evaluation, and formative feedback mechanisms that support rather than undermine student motivation.

4. CONCLUSION

The findings of this study highlight the critical role of motivational strategies in enhancing student engagement in English language classes at SMA and SMK Darul Falah Mataram. Grounded in Self-Determination Theory, the research demonstrates that students are more likely to participate actively and persist in learning when their psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness are met. Specifically, strategies such as offering choices in assignments, incorporating real-world and vocationally relevant content, providing scaffolded feedback, facilitating collaborative learning, and integrating technology were found to significantly improve students' motivation and classroom interaction.

The comparative analysis between SMA and SMK contexts reveals that while the underlying psychological mechanisms of motivation are consistent across both settings, the specific content, activities, and approaches that most effectively engage students differ according to their academic orientation and career aspirations. This finding reinforces the importance of context-sensitive, student-centered pedagogy that responds to the diverse needs and goals of learners.

The study also demonstrates that meaningful change in student motivation does not necessarily require extensive resources or radical pedagogical transformation. Many of the most effective strategies observed—offering choices, connecting content to students' lives, providing encouraging feedback, and creating opportunities for peer collaboration—are readily implementable within existing institutional constraints.

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