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Connecting Theory to Practice

Designing for Student Motivation: A Reflective Framework for Instructors

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Abstract

This article presents a reflective framework for enhancing student motivation through instructional design using the MUSIC model of motivation (Jones, 2009, 2018). Drawing on findings from a qualitative study of 10 experienced English language instructors in Japan, the article highlights how structured reflection around the five components of the MUSIC model—empowerment, usefulness, success, interest, and caring—can support both pedagogical insight and professional growth. An unexpected finding from the study was that participants found the interview process itself to be a valuable opportunity for instructional reflection. Using excerpts from instructor interviews, the article illustrates how reflection guided by the MUSIC model helped participants identify strengths, uncover gaps, and reframe their motivational practices. The article also explores how the framework can be applied in faculty development settings, encouraging instructors to consider the model as a reflective scaffold rather than a prescriptive checklist. The aim is to bridge theory and practice by offering a practical, research-informed tool for supporting motivation in diverse teaching contexts.

Keywords
Motivation, Reflective Teaching, MUSIC model, Instructional Design, Faculty Development

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Introduction

Many university instructors are committed to fostering student motivation, yet they may be uncertain about how to do so in a systematic or intentional way. While motivational theory provides useful frameworks, the connection between theory and everyday teaching practice is not always clear.

This article introduces a reflective framework based on the MUSIC model of motivation (Jones, 2009, 2018), designed to help instructors examine and enhance the motivational climate of their courses. *Motivational climate* refers to the psychological atmosphere of a learning environment that shapes how students feel, think, and act in relation to their motivation and engagement (Ames, 1992; Jones, 2009). The model consists of five components, namely empowerment, usefulness, success, interest, and caring. These components reflect key psychological conditions that support academic motivation and engagement. Table 1 summarizes each component, its associated psychological foundations, and typical examples of classroom strategies aligned with each.

Table 1

Components of the MUSIC Model with Related Theories and Example Strategies

Component	Example Related Theories	Example Strategies
eMpowerment	Self-determination theory (autonomy), self-efficacy theory	Offer choices in content, tasks, or format
Usefulness	Expectancy-value theory, goal theory	Explain how learning is relevant to students' goals
Success	Self-efficacy theory, achievement motivation theory	Set achievable tasks and provide scaffolding
Interest	Intrinsic motivation, interest development theory	Use materials connected to real life or student interests
Caring	Self-determination theory (relatedness), social support theory	Show genuine concern for student learning and well-being

Note: Adapted from Jones (2009, 2018)

Each of the components, summarized in Table 1, is briefly defined below (Jones, 2009; 2018):

- eMpowerment refers to the extent students feel they have control or choice in their learning.
- Usefulness reflects how relevant students believe the content is to their current or future goals.
- Success is the degree students feel capable of succeeding if they put in the effort.
- Interest represents how engaging or stimulating students find the learning experience.
- Caring refers to students' perception that the instructor is genuinely concerned about their learning and well-being.

The framework became central to this article through insights that emerged from a larger qualitative study exploring how experienced English language instructors in Japan foster motivation in their teaching (Moroi, 2024). During the study, the MUSIC model served as an organizing framework for the interviews, and one unexpected finding was that participants described the interview process itself as a valuable opportunity for reflection. Many reported gaining new insights into their instructional practices.

This observation prompted closer consideration of why the MUSIC model, in particular, facilitated such productive reflection. While various motivational frameworks, such as self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985; 2000) and Keller's ARCS model of motivational design (Keller, 2010), offer valuable insights into motivation, the MUSIC model provides a uniquely practical lens for reflection. By integrating constructs from multiple theories into five perceptual components, it enables instructors to connect abstract motivational principles to everyday teaching decisions in a clear and actionable way.

Drawing on participants' own words and examples, this article illustrates how the MUSIC model can be used not only as a theory of motivational design but also as a structured tool for professional reflection. The goal is to support instructors and faculty developers seeking practical ways to connect motivational theory with classroom practice.

The findings presented in this article are part of a larger doctoral research project that explored how university instructors perceive and implement strategies to support student motivation (Moroi, 2024). The study focused on instructors with more than 10 years of experience teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in Japanese universities. This context emphasized communicative, skills-based learning and often requires instructors to balance standardized curriculum requirements with learner-centered approaches.

Ten instructors participated in one-on-one, semi-structured interviews. Their comments are cited using consistent Western pseudonyms throughout this article for clarity and consistency. The participants, however, included both native English-speaking and Japanese instructors. Each

interview was organized around the five components of the MUSIC model of motivation (Jones, 2009, 2018).

The researcher asked participants to describe how they support each component in both in-person and online teaching contexts. The data were analyzed using interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), a qualitative method that focuses on understanding individuals' lived experiences and meaning-making (Jonson & Christensen, 2020; Larsen & Adu, 2021). IPA was well-suited to this study's goal of exploring instructional reflection and beliefs.

Following recommendations for IPA research, I engaged in an active process of bracketing before conducting the interviews to acknowledge and manage my preconceptions about the phenomenon (Adu, 2019; Creswell, 2007; Smith et al., 2021). Because I shared the same profession as the participants, I was particularly mindful of how this insider perspective might shape the interviews. During the interviews, I practiced empathetic neutrality, seeking to understand participants' experiences with openness and sensitivity while maintaining analytic distance (Patton, 2015). These strategies helped me remain open to participants' perspectives, differentiate my experiences from theirs, and focus on their meaning-making during analysis.

While the primary aim was to understand motivational strategies, an unanticipated finding emerged: participants described the interview itself as a rare and valuable opportunity for structured reflection. Several noted that it helped them become more aware of their instructional intentions and areas for growth. This led to a broader consideration of the MUSIC model not only as a design framework, but also as a tool for professional reflection. While the original goal of the study was to explore instructional strategies, participants consistently emphasized the structured reflection itself – guided by the MUSIC model- deepened their instructional awareness.

Why This Reflection Matters

Beyond identifying motivational strategies, a consistent and noteworthy insight was that the structured reflection process itself prompted deeper instructional awareness among participants. Reflecting on the five components of the MUSIC model helped them notice patterns in their teaching, identify areas they had previously overlooked, and reassess how they support student motivation (Jones, 2018; Li & Jones, 2019).

Several instructors noted that the interview was their first opportunity in a long time to pause and think critically about how their instructional decisions influence student motivation and engagement. This highlights a broader challenge in higher education: faculty members often have limited opportunities for guided reflection, despite evidence that such reflection can promote deeper professional learning (Phan, 2009). These insights suggest that the MUSIC model has the potential not only to serve as a motivational framework but also as a structure for meaningful reflection in professional development contexts.

These findings reinforce what Brookfield (2017) described as the transformative potential of critical reflection in teaching. For many participants, the interview provided a rare opportunity to reflect systematically on their instructional choices, often for the first time in years. Rather than prescribing specific actions, the model provides a structured approach for instructors to evaluate their current practices and identify opportunities for improvement. The reflections shared in the following sections illustrate how instructors interpreted and responded to each component, as well as how the process influenced their instructional thinking.

Empowerment: Offering Choices and Encouraging Autonomy

Empowerment was the least commonly supported component among participants. While some instructors offered limited choices, many had not actively considered autonomy as a motivational factor due to the constraints of standardized curricula or required textbooks. Harper shared that she allowed students to select one project topic but admitted, "Honestly, most of the course is still instructor-driven." Sophie noted that she gives students two or three options for assignments, adding, "It's a small thing, but it seems to matter." Others reflected that they had rarely considered autonomy in their course design. Olivia commented, "This was the first time I thought seriously about how little choice students have in my class. I want to work on that." Charlotte noted that autonomy was harder to implement in online settings: "In face-to-face classes, I read the room and give some flexibility. Online, it's more rigid." These reflections prompted instructors to re-evaluate their assumptions about control and flexibility. For many, the process highlighted that even small decisions — such as offering a choice of topic, format, or deadlines — can enhance students' sense of ownership and engagement.

Usefulness: Connecting Course Content to Students' Goals

Usefulness was addressed to varying degrees. Some instructors made efforts to connect content to students' goals, while others had not done so explicitly until prompted to reflect. Ava explained, "I always start the semester by asking students what they want to do in the future, then I connect assignments to that." Noah shared that he incorporates industry-related vocabulary to help students prepare for internships. Others acknowledged gaps in this area. Amelia said, "Honestly, I hadn't thought much about usefulness before this interview. I'll try to incorporate more explicit links next semester." Liam noted, "Sometimes I assume students know why it's useful — but I realize now I should say it out loud." Reflecting on usefulness helped instructors recognize that articulating the relevance of tasks and content can be a simple but powerful way to strengthen students' motivation.

Success: Helping Students Believe They Can Succeed

Success was the most consistently supported component. Many instructors described strategies to build students' confidence and reduce anxiety through scaffolding and support. Mia shared, "I give

lots of small tasks at first so students can build confidence before doing something big." Charlotte emphasized the value of breaking assignments into manageable steps: "If students don't feel they can succeed, they give up early." Others reflected on the need for clearer communication of expectations. Emma commented, "Sometimes I assume students know what 'good work' looks like, but I realize I need to be more transparent." Ava added that identifying struggling students was more difficult in online settings, which made proactive support more challenging. These insights highlighted how structured support and clear guidance can build students' belief in their ability to succeed — a foundation for sustained effort and learning.

Interest: Making Classes Engaging

Interest was supported through interactive and creative strategies, though several instructors noted the need to refresh or re-energize their materials. Sophie said, "I use short videos, role plays, and even games. When students are having fun, they learn more." Noah shared that he adapts topics mid-course based on student interest: "If they're not engaged, I change it up." Others became aware of stagnation in their materials. Liam reflected, "I've used the same slides for years. Maybe it's time to refresh." Amelia commented, "I focus a lot on structure and clarity, but maybe I'm neglecting curiosity." Reflecting on this component reminded instructors that interest is not just about making class fun — it also involves being responsive, introducing novelty, and creating emotionally engaging learning experiences.

Caring: Creating a Supportive Environment

Caring was intuitively supported by most instructors, who described personalized communication and emotional presence as central to their teaching. Olivia said, "I try to learn every student's name, even in large classes." Charlotte observed, "When students see I'm genuinely interested in them, they participate more." Others shared practical ways they demonstrate care in both in-person and online settings. Harper mentioned using check-in surveys to see how students are doing. Mia described following up with students who missed class: "It's small, but they appreciate it." Reflecting on caring reinforced that consistent, small acts — such as remembering names, following up, or using a friendly tone — can build a sense of connection that supports motivation and belonging.

What Instructors Gained from Reflecting

Beyond identifying strategies, the instructors found the reflection process itself valuable. Amelia said, "This gave me a good excuse to slow down and think about what I'm doing." Emma commented, "The MUSIC categories helped me think systematically. Usually, I just go by instinct." Others described it as refreshing or therapeutic. Ava shared, "It felt good to be asked about teaching in this way. I don't get that chance often." Sophie concluded, "This was one of the most helpful professional conversations I've had in a while." These insights suggest that being

prompted to reflect on specific motivational components not only improves instructional awareness but may also support instructors' own motivation and sense of professional identity.

Using This Framework in Faculty Development

The structure of the MUSIC model and the types of reflection it encourages, make this framework ideal for faculty development (Jones, 2018). For example, facilitators might organize a workshop around the five components, prompting instructors to discuss their own teaching and exchange ideas. The reflection questions could also be embedded into peer observation forms, post-course review meetings, or mentoring programs.

Importantly, the participants in this study were all experienced EFL instructors in Japan. This group is likely to have had more exposure to educational psychology and motivational theory than instructors in other fields, as language teacher education programs often emphasize learner-centered pedagogy and include coursework on second language acquisition, motivation, and instructional design (Borg, 2006). Additionally, EFL courses often emphasize interaction and skills-based learning, which naturally aligns with motivational frameworks, such as the MUSIC model (Li & Jones, 2019).

Across the 10 participants, the components of Success and Caring were most consistently addressed, often through scaffolding, emotional support, and encouragement. Usefulness and Interest were addressed to varying degrees, though often without explicit connection to motivational theory. Empowerment — providing students with autonomy and choice — was the least commonly implemented and discussed approach. Several instructors realized they had not considered autonomy meaningfully before the interview.

These patterns are not necessarily problematic. The goal is not to address all five components evenly or equally — rather, instructors should reflect on which components are most relevant and feasible in their context. For example, Empowerment may be less culturally emphasized or structurally feasible in EFL programs in Japan, which often have standardized curricula and assessment protocols. Thus, it is important that faculty development efforts present the MUSIC model not as a checklist to "complete," but as a reflective scaffold that helps instructors uncover blind spots and consider intentional motivational design (Brookfield, 2017).

To broaden the usefulness and applicability of this reflection framework, future work should explore how instructors in other contexts respond to it. The MUSIC model has been successfully implemented and validated across various disciplines and instructional formats, including large lecture courses, STEM fields, and teacher education, demonstrating its adaptability to different educational settings (Jones & Wilkins, 2013; Jones & Leech, 2015; Jones & Skaggs, 2016; Li & Jones, 2019).

These findings suggest broad applicability, yet how instructors engage with the framework may vary across cultural and disciplinary contexts. For instance, it would be valuable to examine how novice instructors, content-area lecturers (e.g., in science, business, or humanities), and those who teach lecture-heavy courses in Japan engage with the framework. Their educational background, training, and disciplinary culture may shape how they perceive and implement motivational strategies.

Ultimately, understanding these contextual differences can help us design more tailored faculty development programs that consider not just motivational theory, but also the instructor's professional identity and teaching environment (Korthagen, 2017).

A Suggested Process for Implementing the Reflective Framework

The reflections of the participants combined to produce a process for implementing the reflective framework. The elements of that framework are:

1. Introduce the five MUSIC components and invite instructors to map their current practices.
2. Facilitate guided small-group discussions on each component.
3. Encourage participants to identify one growth component and plan an actionable change.
4. Follow up with peer feedback or classroom observation using the same reflective lens.
5. Revisit reflections after implementation to evaluate shifts in awareness and practice.

Limitations

Although the MUSIC model offers a practical structure for reflection, it may be insufficient when instructors seek to analyze why specific motivational patterns occur rather than simply identify them. For instance, expectancy–value theory (Wigfield & Eccles, 2000) distinguishes among multiple dimensions of value—such as intrinsic, attainment, utility, and perceived cost—that can deepen understanding of the "usefulness" component and clarify why students may value the same task differently. In contexts where motivational challenges stem from nuanced cost-benefit considerations or conflicting task values, expectancy–value theory may offer more diagnostic precision than the MUSIC model alone. Considering such complementary frameworks can extend the MUSIC model's utility by linking reflective insights to more detailed motivational mechanisms.

Conclusion

Supporting student motivation does not require advanced degrees in psychology or massive course redesigns. Often, it begins with a few well-placed questions and a willingness to reflect. The instructors in this study shared practical strategies and powerful realizations — many of which emerged through structured reflection using the MUSIC model. By creating space to consider the

five components, instructors can make intentional changes that enhance motivation. Equally important, the act of reflection itself can be affirming and energizing for educators. Motivational teaching is not about perfection. It is about intentionality, responsiveness, and growth for students and teachers alike.

Reflect on Your Own Teaching

As you consider the insights and strategies shared in this article, take a moment to reflect on your own instructional context. The following questions can help guide that reflection:

- Which of the five components of the MUSIC model do you consider most important in your teaching environment, and why?
- Are there any components you tend to address less often? What might be the reasons for that?
- How do institutional or cultural factors shape the kinds of motivational strategies that are feasible in your courses?
- What new possibilities for supporting student motivation emerged for you through this framework?

These prompts are intended to support professional self-reflection and can also be adapted for use in peer dialogue, mentoring sessions, or faculty development workshops.

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