IJARSCT
International Journal of Advanced Research in Science, Communication and Technology
International Open-Access, Double-Blind, Peer-Reviewed, Refereed, Multidisciplinary Online Journal
ISSN: 2581-9429
Volume 6, Issue 6, March 2026
Impact Factor: 8.2

# Artificial Intelligence-Driven Personalized Learning Models for Enhancing Student Engagement in 21st Century Classrooms

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**Abstract:** *The integration of Artificial Intelligence (AI) into educational practice represents a paradigm shift in addressing the persistent challenge of student engagement in 21st century classrooms. This paper examines AI-driven personalized learning models and their effectiveness in enhancing student engagement across behavioral, emotional, and cognitive dimensions. Drawing on empirical evidence from recent studies and systematic reviews, the analysis demonstrates that adaptive learning algorithms, intelligent tutoring systems, and generative AI tools significantly improve learner motivation, academic performance, and persistence. Framed through Self-Determination Theory, the paper argues that AI personalization supports the fulfillment of students' basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Key findings indicate that context-personalized learning materials generate higher intrinsic motivation and learning outcomes, while AI-driven feedback systems foster growth mindsets and sustained engagement. The paper also addresses critical challenges including algorithmic bias, data privacy, and scalability in resource-constrained settings. The analysis concludes with recommendations for educators, developers, and policymakers to ensure equitable, ethical, and effective implementation of AI-driven personalized learning.*

**Keywords**: Artificial Intelligence, Personalized Learning, Student Engagement, Adaptive Learning Systems, Self-Determination Theory, Intelligent Tutoring Systems

## I. INTRODUCTION

The 21st century classroom faces a persistent pedagogical challenge: sustaining student motivation and engagement in increasingly diverse learning environments. Traditional one-size-fits-all instructional approaches frequently fail to address individual learners' unique needs, preferences, and learning paces, particularly in complex and technical subject areas (Masih, 2025; Mokoagow et al., 2026). As global education systems contend with mounting pressure to improve learning outcomes and prepare future-ready graduates, the demand for innovative, data-driven instructional models has become increasingly urgent (Santoso et al., 2025).

Artificial Intelligence has emerged as a transformative force capable of reshaping educational practice by enabling real-time, adaptive personalization at scale. AI-driven learning systems leverage machine learning algorithms, natural language processing, and multimodal analytics to analyze learner behavior, predict performance trajectories, and dynamically adjust instructional content (Apostolidis et al., 2025; Bali, 2026). Unlike traditional differentiation strategies, which are resource-intensive and limited in scope, AI technologies offer the capacity to create individualized learning journeys that respond instantly to each student's evolving strengths and challenges (Roozafzai & Zaeri, 2024).

This paper examines the theoretical foundations, empirical evidence, and practical implications of AI-driven personalized learning models for enhancing student engagement. Drawing on Self-Determination Theory (SDT) as an analytical framework, the analysis explores how AI technologies can support the fulfillment of students' basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Fathi et al., 2024). The paper synthesizes findings from recent empirical studies, systematic reviews, and meta-analyses to assess the effectiveness of various AI approaches, including adaptive learning algorithms, intelligent tutoring systems, generative AI tools, and gamified AI-supported environments.

## II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: SELF-DETERMINATION THEORY AND PERSONALIZED LEARNING

Self-Determination Theory provides a robust framework for understanding how AI-driven personalization influences student engagement. According to SDT, intrinsic motivation and sustained engagement emerge when three basic psychological needs are fulfilled: autonomy (the need for self-direction and choice), competence (the need to experience mastery and effectiveness), and relatedness (the need for meaningful connection with others) (Ryan & Deci, 2017; Fathi et al., 2024).

AI-driven personalized learning environments can support these needs in several ways. Autonomy is promoted when learners are given choices over task selection, pacing, and feedback modality—features increasingly enabled by adaptive learning platforms (Benayache & Mourad, 2024). Competence is fostered through adaptive feedback that calibrates task difficulty, provides clear actionable guidance, and makes learning gains visible (Roozafzai & Zaeri, 2024). Relatedness, while more challenging to achieve through AI systems alone, can be supported through conversational agents, avatars, and collaborative features that simulate peer interaction and provide encouraging, personalized prompts (Fathi et al., 2024).

Theoretical models of interest and motivation further illuminate the mechanisms through which personalization enhances engagement. According to the person-object theory of interest, situational interest—triggered by specific conditions within the learning environment—can develop into more stable individual interest when students experience positive, self-directed engagement with content (Krapp, 2002; Rau et al., 2025). Context-personalization, which aligns instructional content with students' out-of-school interests, has been shown to trigger situational interest and enhance intrinsic motivation, particularly when students possess prior knowledge in the subject area (Rau et al., 2025).

## III. AI-DRIVEN PERSONALIZED LEARNING MODELS: TYPES AND MECHANISMS

### 3.1 Adaptive Learning Algorithms

Adaptive learning algorithms constitute the primary engine driving personalization in AI-enhanced educational systems. These algorithms employ machine learning techniques—including supervised learning (decision trees, support vector machines), unsupervised learning (k-means clustering), and reinforcement learning—to analyze learner data and dynamically adjust instructional content (Apostolidis et al., 2025).

Supervised learning models classify learners based on academic performance, behavioral attributes, and demographic profiles, enabling customized instructional interventions. Decision trees are valued for their interpretability, while support vector machines handle complex, high-dimensional datasets effectively (Apostolidis et al., 2025). Unsupervised clustering techniques identify latent groupings within learner data, detecting behavioral trends such as engagement patterns, time-on-task, and quiz performance without predefined labels (Apostolidis et al., 2025). Reinforcement learning enables systems to refine instructional strategies through ongoing interaction, continuously adjusting content delivery to maximize long-term educational benefits (Bali, 2026).

Empirical evidence demonstrates that adaptive algorithms significantly enhance student engagement and comprehension. Santoso et al. (2025) found that adaptive learning tools dynamically adjusting content to learner levels of understanding positively influenced academic outcomes in higher education. Similarly, Masih (2025) reported that machine learning models—particularly XGBoost, deep neural networks, and reinforcement learning—effectively identify student needs and provide dynamic, adaptive instruction.

### 3.2 Intelligent Tutoring Systems

Intelligent Tutoring Systems represent a sophisticated application of AI that emulates the benefits of one-on-one tutoring. These systems track student progress, customize task difficulty, deliver targeted feedback, and boost engagement through

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immediate, context-aware responses (Ardimento et al., 2025; Apostolidis et al., 2025). Unlike traditional feedback mechanisms, which suffer from delay and inconsistency, AI-driven ITS provide real-time guidance that prevents the consolidation of misconceptions and maintains learners within their optimal challenge zone (Fathi et al., 2024).

Recent advancements integrating large language models have enhanced the adaptability and responsiveness of ITS, enabling more natural, dialogue-based interactions that mirror human tutoring (Ardimento et al., 2025). Studies indicate that AI tutoring systems significantly improve learning satisfaction and reduce cognitive overload through scaffolding and real-time error correction (Fathi et al., 2024).

### 3.3 Generative AI for Context-Personalization

Generative AI technologies, particularly Large Language Models such as GPT-4, enable the real-time creation of context-personalized learning materials and tasks tailored to individual student interests (Rau et al., 2025). This capability addresses a fundamental limitation of traditional personalization: the significant resources required for educators to create individualized content.

Rau et al. (2025) conducted a systematic investigation of a GAI-based tool in German primary school mathematics classes (N=114), comparing context-personalized versus standard learning materials and tasks. Results demonstrated that learning with context-personalized materials led to higher intrinsic motivation, greater interest, and higher learning performance compared to standard approaches. This finding highlights how non-school-related interests can trigger situational interest and enhance motivation in academic contexts.

### 3.4 Gamified AI-Supported Environments

Gamified AI-supported digital learning environments integrate adaptive or generative AI with game-based design to support personalized learning. A systematic review and meta-analysis of 81 studies (2015-2025) found that gamified AI-supported environments demonstrated significant positive effects on science learning outcomes compared with non-AI instructional conditions (standardized mean difference = 1.01; 95% CI: 0.69–1.33) (Ashirbekova et al., 2025). Effects were stronger in secondary education (SMD = 1.12) than primary education (SMD = 0.80), with adaptive or generative AI systems tending to produce larger effect sizes. Evidence regarding student engagement was generally positive but showed substantial contextual heterogeneity.

## IV. EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE ON STUDENT ENGAGEMENT OUTCOMES

### 4.1 Motivational and Psychological Outcomes

Research consistently demonstrates that AI-driven personalization enhances intrinsic motivation and interest. Rau et al. (2025) found that context-personalized learning materials and tasks produced higher intrinsic motivation and interest compared to standard approaches, with effect sizes supporting the theoretical relationship between situational interest and individual interest development.

Fathi et al. (2024) investigated AI-driven feedback through an SDT lens with 507 undergraduate students using an AI tutoring system over six weeks. Results revealed that perceived AI feedback quality exerted strong direct effects on engagement and persistence, with indirect effects mediated through intrinsic motivation and learner autonomy. All indirect effects were statistically significant ($p < .01$), underscoring the dual motivational pathways through which algorithmic feedback supports self-regulated learning.

A study of an AI-enhanced English learning system (N=94) in Saudi secondary schools found significant gains in learning motivation ($\eta^2 = .31$) and vocabulary post-test scores (Cohen's $d = 0.82$), with a reduction in drop-off rates from 23% to 6% (ScienceDirect, 2026). Lag-sequential analysis showed that adaptive feedback elicited 1.8 times higher-order peer dialogue, indicating enhanced cognitive engagement.

### 4.2 Behavioral and Academic Performance Outcomes

Mokoagow et al. (2026) employed a mixed-methods approach across five institutions integrating AI tools into teaching practices. Students engaging with AI-powered tools demonstrated significant improvements in engagement (82%) and academic performance (75%), particularly through personalized learning features. Educators reported enhanced classroom efficiency, as AI tools automated administrative tasks and provided real-time student progress data.

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Roozafzai and Zaeri (2024) investigated the intersection of AI, animation, and personalized learning through a quasi-experimental design involving an eight-week AI-driven personalized learning intervention. Findings revealed enhanced learner motivation, improved knowledge retention, and higher academic performance, suggesting that multimodal AI integration creates inclusive and adaptable learning environments.

A study of fourth-year English major students in Vietnam (N=155) found that AI-driven tools significantly improved personalized learning by adapting content to individual needs, provided timely and effective feedback, enhanced tutoring support, and boosted student engagement through interactive and gamified elements (Thai et al., 2025).

### 4.3 Engagement-Responsive Pedagogy

Emerging research explores engagement-responsive pedagogical frameworks that leverage AI to trigger micro-level interventions based on real-time engagement predictions. Ibitoye et al. (2026) introduced PRISM (Personalised Adaptive Learning, Responsive Engagement, Immersive Learning Experiences, and Social Collaboration), operationalized through a multimodal transformer model using over 290,000 learner-video interaction records. The model achieved superior predictive performance (F1 = 82.6%), outperforming text-only and metadata-only baselines. Simulation experiments suggested that timely, engagement-triggered interventions may help reduce learner drop-off and improve engagement metrics.

## V. CRITICAL CHALLENGES AND LIMITATIONS

### 5.1 Algorithmic Bias and Equity Concerns

Despite promising outcomes, AI-driven personalized learning faces significant challenges. Algorithmic bias remains a critical concern, as training data may reflect existing educational inequities, potentially reinforcing rather than ameliorating achievement gaps (Apostolidis et al., 2025). The explainability of AI decision-making processes—particularly deep learning models—presents additional challenges, as educators and learners may struggle to understand the rationale behind AI-generated feedback, leading to uncertainty or reduced agency (Fathi et al., 2024).

### 5.2 Data Privacy and Ethical Considerations

Data privacy constitutes a fundamental concern in AI-enhanced education. Personalized learning systems require extensive learner data—including clickstream paths, quiz responses, time-on-task metrics, and potentially biometric and affective data—raising questions about consent, data ownership, and security (Apostolidis et al., 2025). The integration of affective computing and biometric data further intensifies privacy concerns, particularly in educational contexts involving minors.

### 5.3 Scalability and Resource Constraints

Scalability remains a significant barrier, particularly in low-resource settings. Bali (2026) addressed this challenge through a context-aware intelligent learning framework designed for developing countries, integrating reinforcement learning with edge-compatible deployment to support operation across rural offline, urban hybrid, and smart classrooms. The framework achieved a 26.4% improvement in learning gains, 89.2% time-on-task efficiency, and reduced dropout risk (<4%) over baseline systems.

### 5.4 Educator Resistance and Role Transformation

Educator resistance to AI integration reflects concerns about technological complexity, potential professional displacement, and loss of relational connection with students (Ardimento et al., 2025). Successful implementation requires redefining the educator's role as facilitator and interpreter of AI-generated insights, supported by adequate professional development and institutional commitment.

## VI. RECOMMENDATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

### 6.1 For Educators and Institutions

Educators should approach AI-driven personalized learning as a complementary tool that enhances rather than replaces pedagogical expertise. Implementation strategies should prioritize autonomy-supportive feedback, competence-affirming prompts, and systems designed with SDT principles in mind (Fathi et al., 2024). Teacher training programs must develop

AI literacy, enabling educators to interpret AI-generated insights and integrate them into differentiated instruction (Mokoagow et al., 2026). Institutions should adopt modular system designs enabling incremental implementation while maintaining flexibility for context-specific adaptation (Apostolidis et al., 2025).

### 6.2 For Developers and Designers

Developers should prioritize explainable AI that makes decision-making processes transparent and comprehensible to learners and educators (Apostolidis et al., 2025). Multimodal data integration—combining text, voice, facial expression, and interactive behavior—can enhance the accuracy of adaptive recommendations and learner participation (ScienceDirect, 2026). Privacy-preserving learning mechanisms and edge-compatible deployment are essential for equitable access across resource-constrained environments (Bali, 2026).

### 6.3 For Policymakers

Policymakers must establish ethical frameworks addressing algorithmic bias, data privacy, and equitable access to AI-enhanced education (Apostolidis et al., 2025). Funding priorities should support research on culturally responsive frameworks and longitudinal studies examining sustained engagement outcomes. International collaboration is essential to address the geographical imbalance in the evidence base, with Central Asia and many developing regions substantially underrepresented in current research (Ashirbekova et al., 2025).

### 6.4 Future Research Directions

Future research should adopt theory-driven and longitudinal designs to examine how specific combinations of AI functionalities, gamification mechanics, and classroom integration strategies produce scalable educational outcomes (Ashirbekova et al., 2025). Enhanced social-affective cues in AI feedback and the integration of multimodal large language models warrant empirical investigation (Fathi et al., 2024). Real-world deployment studies, particularly in resource-constrained and multilingual contexts, are essential to validate simulation findings and ensure equitable, inclusive AI-driven education (Bali, 2026).

## VII. CONCLUSION

AI-driven personalized learning models represent a transformative approach to enhancing student engagement in 21st century classrooms. Empirical evidence demonstrates that adaptive learning algorithms, intelligent tutoring systems, generative AI tools, and gamified AI-supported environments significantly improve intrinsic motivation, academic performance, and persistence. Framed through Self-Determination Theory, these technologies support the fulfillment of students' basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness, enabling more inclusive, responsive, and effective learning environments.

However, realizing the full potential of AI-driven personalization requires addressing critical challenges including algorithmic bias, data privacy, scalability, and educator resistance. As the evidence base continues to expand—with recent meta-analyses and systematic reviews providing robust support for effectiveness—the imperative shifts from whether to adopt AI-enhanced personalization to how to implement it equitably, ethically, and effectively. Future research must prioritize theory-driven, longitudinal, and context-sensitive designs to ensure that AI-driven personalized learning fulfills its promise of fostering deeper engagement, greater equity, and transformative educational outcomes for all learners.

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