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The Impact of Self-Determination Theory on Student Motivation, and How it can be Applied in the Language-Learning Classroom

Countless studies have highlighted the importance of motivation among students who are learning a language. It is one of the most crucial elements to success in language acquisition, and provides the impetus needed to sustain interest in the subject over the extended period of time necessary to progress and improve in the language. As noted by Dörnyei (1998), “without sufficient motivation, even individuals with the most remarkable abilities cannot accomplish long-term goals” (p. 117). In Japan, The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) has outlined the importance of increasing motivation among Japanese students, noting that “the government will support the promotion of strategic innovation in English education. In addition, [...] we will expand the available opportunities for increasing student motivation and using English” (MEXT, 2013). In later publications on the matter, MEXT goes on to highlight motivation for learning English as a key part of its framework for improving the acquisition of foreign languages among Japanese students in order to develop world-standard English skills in response to globalization (MEXT, 2014).

Motivation can be divided into two main sub-categories: “intrinsic motivation (desire to do something based on a combination of interest, enjoyment and personal challenge), and extrinsic motivation (desire to do something based on a desire for external rewards, such as grades or salary)” (Oxford, 2011, p. 72). Self-Determination Theory (SDT) assesses how our behaviors are motivated, and examines the degree to which we are influenced by internal or external factors. It focuses particularly on the importance of intrinsic motivation in supporting learning and growth, and became more widely discussed with the publication in 1985 of a book titled *Intrinsic Motivation and Self-Determination in Human Behavior* by Edward L. Deci and Richard Ryan. Deci and Ryan put forward the theory that conditions supporting three crucial components – autonomy, competence and relatedness – were found to foster the strongest motivation for people’s engagement in activities, and that when any of these three components were not supported, there would be a noticeable drop-off in motivation. As the concept continued to be developed, SDT was further broken down into six mini theories, each one addressing a single facet of motivation, such as Goal Contents Theory (GCT), which discusses the impact of intrinsic and extrinsic goals on motivation, and Basic Psychological Needs Theory (BPNT), which examines how basic well-being is grounded on the aforementioned factors of autonomy, competence and relatedness. In further publications, Ryan and Deci reiterated the importance of intrinsic motivation and the impact that its absence can have on students, writing: “When there is little intrinsic motivation for learning, and no inherent interest and excitement in what is going on in the classroom, then both learning outcome and student wellness are in jeopardy” (Ryan & Deci, 2017, p. 354).

In this article, I will discuss how the three factors of autonomy, competence and relatedness have an impact on student learning outcomes. I will then present some examples from my own teaching experience of situations where student motivation was affected or challenged by

various circumstances, and the reasons behind it. Finally, I will look at the possibilities for practical applications in a language-learning classroom setting that can foster students' intrinsic motivation and lead to further growth in English language acquisition.

The first of the three factors, autonomy, relates to students being in control of their studies, and having the freedom to make choices and decisions regarding their learning. An autonomous learner is one who actively reflects on their learning and progress, and takes steps to ensure they are progressing in their studies. "There is an intimate relationship between autonomy and effective learning," noted Dafei (2007, p. 3) in a study showing that "students' English proficiency was significantly and positively related to their learner autonomy" (p. 15). I have written in *Learning Learning* previously about the importance of students feeling that they have a say in their learning outcomes. I have also suggested some methods that instructors can implement in their classroom whereby students will feel empowered, such as the freedom for students to choose their own assignments. "Rather than overloading students with multiple homework exercises related to all the topics taught in that day's class, I present the homework assignments and ask them to choose two or three activities that they found most difficult during the class and just complete those for homework. This allows students to feel that they have their say about the direction that their English education is progressing in" (Ryan, 2020, p. 19). Having tried this strategy, I noticed that it works especially well for students who are taking a heavy course load and ensures that they don't feel overburdened with their studies and can approach their English learning with some degree of freedom. However, there is the obvious drawback that there will also be some students who take advantage of this freedom to do very little work. It seems to be most beneficial for students when the process is scaffolded at first, where students have the freedom of choice regarding which assignments to complete, but with a rule that they must submit a minimum number. Once they have gotten used to the process and their feelings of autonomy grow, students will generally complete their tasks without the need for strict oversight.

However, this year I noticed one area that I had overlooked, which was in relation to course projects for the English 1A and 1B courses I teach. These are first year courses where students are divided into four groups and they rotate through four English classes in turn, each one focusing on a skill from reading, writing, listening and speaking. When planning my curriculum for the courses I am in charge of, one aspect that must be included is an in-class project, which accounts for some of the overall grade for the course. I have the freedom to choose the format of the project – it could be a written test, a group presentation, etc. – as well as the date that it would take place. I fixed the date for a point that worked well for the class schedule, but I later noticed a clash with similar deadlines for other courses the students were taking. When project time rolled around for my class, I saw that many students' attention was divided and they seemed to be working on multiple topics at once. When I questioned them about this, I learned that they had an important exam coming up around the same time. I work in a medical university and an upcoming exam for a difficult medical subject was rated as 'more important' than English in many of these students' minds, so some were choosing to focus on studying that subject instead and just doing the bare minimum amount of work on their English project. If I had consulted with my first year students at the start of the course and learned about their exam schedule ahead of time, I could have worked with them to choose a project deadline that was better suited to their schedule, or even allowed them to submit their project at any point during the course in order for them to feel a greater sense of autonomy. The success of this type of strategy is explained by Sakai and Takagi (2009) in a study that found the best achieving students in a class group were also those who "do not believe that teachers are solely responsible for class management, despite being taught in a teacher-oriented classroom; even under such circumstances, they saw it important to set personal goals and control their study path," (p. 314). Going forward, I plan to change my approach to course projects with regard to setting deadlines. I believe that students can feel more in control of their study path if I

consult with them on the type of projects they would prefer as well as working together to choose the submission deadline. If this changed approach results in an increased sense of autonomy and motivation among my students and an improvement in the quality of work submitted by them, I may then apply a freer approach where students can submit their project at any time of their choosing throughout the course.

My next experience relates to both competence and relatedness, the second and third factors mentioned by Deci and Ryan (1985, 2000, 2017). Competence refers to the ability that a person has to complete their assigned tasks and the desire to feel capable of overcoming any challenges that they are faced with, while relatedness explains the desire that humans have to feel a sense of connection with others and to feel like we belong. I have noticed the importance of this to students in my own classroom experiences. At the end of an elective English Communication course that I was teaching with a group of first year students, I decided to review topics learned during the year with a board game activity that I created. Students would roll the die and move around the board, answering questions based on topics discussed during the year. If they answered correctly they could move on, and the first person to reach the finish line was the winner. I imagined that the competitive aspect of the activity would encourage them to speak up more in English and be more active. Instead, what I noticed immediately was that they treated it as a group activity. Each person would get prompts and help from their “competitors” if they were stuck on a question, which ensured that no one got sent back to the start for missing an answer. Competition – even friendly competition in the setting of what I had planned to be a fun activity – was less of a motivating factor than the intrinsic desire to help their friends and feel connected to them. The fact that students might shy away from the pressures that come with the competitive aspect of the game is borne out in a study by Wang et al. (2019), who said: “Competence was found to negatively [relate] to pressure. This is consistent with SDT. As competence is a reflection of one’s belief about ability to produce desired outcomes, it is not surprising that this need could be negatively related to perceived tension or pressure” (p. 5).

While I was surprised by the direction that students took this activity in, it was an important learning opportunity for me, in that it allowed me to change my perspective on what kinds of activity would be considered as stressful in their minds, and why. I wondered about how I could change this activity to make it more rewarding for them. My initial thought was to pair them into teams to work together to reach the goal, but then there might be some pressure to not let their team member down or to be embarrassed in front of them by giving a wrong answer. This type of shame can sometimes be viewed as even worse than a poor grade, as pointed out by Brown (2004) suggesting, “the specific form of negative evaluation that students seem to fear most is the real or imagined ridicule of their peers” (p. 8). Considering that the students taking this course are first years with little experience in an active-learning environment up to this point, and that this is an elective course without a final exam component, I am planning to conduct this review activity in a different way in future courses. By providing the answers to students either in the form of a matching activity or a self-correction format, they will still be able to evaluate their knowledge of the course material but will be relieved of the pressure to deliver a correct answer on the spot in front of the instructor and their peers. When students’ competence and relatedness are supported in this manner, I believe that their motivation will grow and they will feel equipped to take on further challenges in the future.

It is our responsibility as educators not to rest on our laurels but instead to constantly strive to examine our teaching methods and classroom management styles in order to best support the students who come through our doors each semester. Students’ basic well-being is grounded on autonomy, competence and relatedness. When these three factors are supported, students can grow their intrinsic motivation for learning a language. When doing so in my own classroom, I will also take the advice of Wang et al. (2019), who wrote: “Teachers are able to meet their students’ core psychological needs of competence, autonomy, and relatedness and create interesting

and challenging lessons that are relevant to their lives. Students are given appropriate levels of challenges and they are able to make decisions about their learning (p.1).” In such situations, a harmonious learning environment is fostered where students are supported to reach their full potential in English. Using Self-Determination Theory as a framework, I will continue to respond to the needs of my students and act to ensure they are encouraged and supported to grow their motivation for language learning in the future.

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