Self-determined motivation and engagement in language: A dialogic process

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Background: What's so funny about self-determined motivation?

A major problem of the 20th century can be traced back to the use and misuse of the ideas of self-determination. While the details of this rhetological problem are better left to a historical analysis, there remains a holdover reticence in intercultural studies to recognize concepts and constructs related to the idea of self-determination (see Chirkov, Ryan, Kim, & Kaplan, 2003). Often, the question is whether self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2017) can effectively describe the nuances of local culture, with their own unique and often interdependent views and idiosyncrasies (King & McInerney, 2014). According to this view, isn't self-determination theory just another peculiarly western educated industrialized rich democratic (WEIRD; Henrich, Heine, & Norenzayan, 2009) idea, now being imposed on the world through English language education? How does the seemingly "American imperialist" idea of self-determination apply to teaching and learning any new language in Ho Chi Minh City, Moscow, Havana, or Tehran?

For nearly 40 years, self-determination theory (SDT; Ryan & Deci, 2017) has worked *against* the idea of a zero-sum, "my rights versus yours" approach to the concept of motivating individuals to move in a specific direction. Some would have us believe that the autonomous motivation of the teacher to achieve a goal (completing a curriculum, for example) impinges on the autonomous motivation of students (for instance, to play and have fun). Instead, SDT posits that by properly working with learners' cultural expectations, meeting their needs for positive human interaction and success, and nurturing their desire to learn, teachers can get better engagement and ultimately better learning. A growing body of self-determination theory research from around the globe corroborates the idea that nurturing basic psychological needs and supporting individuals' inner

motivational resources can indeed have positive effects across cultural boundaries (Chen et al., 2015; Reeve et al., 2013). Self-determined motivation and its corollary mini-theories form an interdependent whole, much as all parts of the modern world work together. When needs are thwarted and controlled in one area, the negative effects spread throughout the whole system; when these needs are met in one place, this can have similar unforeseen positive effects elsewhere.

Learning a language requires a similar degree of interplay in many parts of the system. As recent work suggests (Papi & Hiver, 2020), the motivation to learn a language is complex, nuanced, and the many interworking pieces can influence the whole in unexpected ways. Self-determination theory is consistent with this perspective, offering insight at both the macro-group and micro-intraindividual levels (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Each of the mini-theories offers an empirically based set of assumptions, measures, and hypotheses on how language learners are motivated. According to SDT, language learners' engagement in learning tasks comes at the intersection of prior motives and environmental influences (Oga-Baldwin, Nakata, Parker, & Ryan, 2017). This dialogic process focuses on creating mutual understanding, where learners respond to teachers' instruction, and teachers' in turn match how students respond (Jang, Reeve, & Halusic, 2016; Skinner, Furrer, Marchand, & Kindermann, 2008).

Self-determination theory offers a set of interrelated, interdependent hypothetical relationships among different aspects of language learners, their teachers and peers, and learning tasks. Though not a specific theory of language motivation, self-determination theory offers a number of advantages for studies of language education. Primarily, this generalized perspective allows for the creation of testable hypotheses for the relationships between different aspects of motivation, based on studies of language along with findings from related fields. The key difference between SDT and other language-specific motivation theories is how SDT can draw immediate parallels with other skill learning, such as teaching (Reeve & Jang, 2006), music (Evans, McPherson, & Davidson, 2012), sports (Ntoumanis & Standage, 2009), and coaching (Bhavsar et al., 2019). By integrating this perspective with the existing literature on language learning, we can achieve a deeper and richer understanding of both general human motivation and domain specific language motivation.

Self-determination theory: A concise overview

The central ideas of self-determination theory focus on helping learners develop *intrinsic motivation*, that is, motivation coming from an inherent interest and enjoyment of the task (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Intrinsic motivation comes from within the person. The importance of intrinsic motivation in education has been well researched. One meta-analysis on SDT in educational settings (Taylor et al., 2014) indicated that intrinsic motivation was a

significant predictor of achievement, a result corroborated in later studies of diverse American high school students (Froiland & Worrell, 2016).

At the same time, not every motive comes from the desire to engage in a task for its own sake; when some tasks are not perceived to be enjoyable, their impetus is likely to come from external sources. The diverse motives that arise from outside of a learner exist on a continuum of *extrinsic motivation* (Ryan & Deci, 2017), described by **organismic integration theory**. This mini-theory describes the different, concurrent motives that may regulate learners' language learning motivation. Fully *external regulation* of motivation is the desire to avoid punishments or gain short term rewards. In education, this happens when teachers attempt to motivate by giving stickers, stars, and grades for good behavior (perhaps using the target language), or making rules and apply punishments for bad behavior (not participating in class). Other steps on the continuum move from fully external regulation. Motives which come from guilt, shame, or a desire to please others (parents or peers) with their language performance is called *introjected regulation*. More internalized motives may come from a desire to do well, such as being able to use a foreign language, titled *identified regulation*. Finally, SDT describes how learners may feel a sense of integration, in which using the foreign language is a part of their conception of self, labeled *integrated regulation*. A predominance of motivation across each of the above steps moves learners towards more internalized, *intrinsic regulation*. Completely outside of this process, *amotivation* indicates the lack of desire to learn the language, perhaps due to lack of value, excessive difficulty, or burdensome time costs (Fryer, Bovee, & Nakao, 2014; Legault, Green-Demers, & Pelletier, 2006).

As an example of how students experience each form of regulation as the primary form of motive, we offer a vignette of a student who begins learning Spanish in elementary school. He does not have a choice in the matter; classes are held once each week for half an hour. Though he enjoys the Spanish songs they sing in class and likes practicing the vocabulary, he mostly participates so that he can get a gold star in the Spanish learning passport that records students' daily progress (external regulation). In junior high school, he is given a choice of learning French or Spanish, but an older student he looks up to tells him that Spanish is what "cool people" study. He wants to be accepted by those older peers and follows their example. Simultaneously, he wishes to show his family and teachers that he is a good student (introjected regulation). As he reaches high school, he begins feeling a desire to learn the language in order to be able to really use it in real world situations. He sees the language as a tool for communicating with Spanish speakers in various social situations, and travels to a Spanish speaking country for several weeks during his summer vacation to learn more (identified regulation). Finally, he enters university and decides to pursue a degree in Spanish language, now feeling that the language is part of who he is (integrated regulation). Along the way in his studies, he has had enjoyable experiences that bring him closer to seeing learning Spanish as a worthwhile task in and of itself (intrinsic

regulation). Though at each of these points other forms of regulation may also play a role (e.g., this student may also want to get good grades to please his parents all throughout; he may also be aware of school rules about necessary baseline academic performance), these motives are not the primary drivers of his engagement in Spanish class. He has integrated the external motives into his person and made learning the language ever more intrinsically motivated.

This poses a question: what was it that fed this student's intrinsic motivation? In describing more about this student's learning experience, we attempt to show how the six mini-theories (starting with organismic integration theory and continuing below) weave the different interactions between the person and environment together to explain how this student was able to proceed a positive motivational trajectory.

SDT posits that intrinsic motives arise when learners *basic need for competence, relatedness, and autonomy* are met (Ryan & Deci, 2017). When learners feel competent at a task, they are likely to continue (Bandura, 1997). When they feel connected with the people around them, they are more likely to engage in learning (Furrer & Skinner, 2003). When they feel a sense of purpose, relevance, and choice in their behavior, they are likely to work willingly (Jang, Reeve, Ryan, & Kim, 2009). Together, these three concepts form the basis for **basic psychological needs theory**. Robust and growing evidence for the validity of the three basic needs in diverse intercultural settings shows their universal nature in promoting intrinsic motivation and well-being (Chen et al., 2015; Chirkov, 2009). While some of the ideas, especially the relationship between choice and autonomy (Iyengar & Lepper, 1999), are controversial, these questions have largely been laid to rest across cultural settings (Chirkov, 2009). Important to recognize here is that choice is not synonymous with autonomy and does not necessarily fortify a sense of autonomy in all settings (Katz & Assor, 2006). Though some studies do indeed indicate differential functions of the needs across cultures (Joe, Hiver, & Al-Hoorie, 2017), findings continue to show competence, relatedness, and autonomy are interconnected and important nutriments for intrinsic motivation (Nicholson & Putwain, 2016).

Taking from the Spanish learner explained above, it can be assumed that he has experienced a sense of competence, relatedness, and autonomy need satisfaction throughout his learning. When he succeeds at Spanish in his elementary school class and correctly produces the songs he is taught, his need for competence may be met. He feels relatedness in junior high school when he is accepted into a group and develops close friendships with students also taking Spanish. Finally, he feels autonomous when he sees value in learning the language in high school and chooses to use the language with a community of native speakers in their own country. These experiences accumulate and provide him with reserves of intrinsic motives for learning the language, while continually experiencing need satisfaction supports his motivation going forward.

As to how language teachers can help students develop intrinsic motivation, the key is in the quality of interaction with their students. These interactions become resources which satisfy learners' psychological needs. Need support, especially *autonomy support*, forms a crucial part of **cognitive evaluation theory**. By providing instruction that nurtures learners inner motivational resources (Reeve & Jang, 2006), teachers can help learners develop a sense of ownership and integration with a new language. Through *autonomy support*, teachers across the world can work with learners and help their students feel invested and agentic in the process of learning the language by teaching them in a familiar and comfortable fashion (Jang et al., 2016). *Structure* provides the guidance that learners need to succeed in class, helping them stay on task and achieve understanding (Sugita-McEown & Oga-Baldwin, 2019; Oga-Baldwin & Nakata, 2015). Finally, *involvement* describes how teachers develop quality relationships with students (Furrer & Skinner, 2003). Research has shown that it is not one but all of these elements together that promotes need satisfaction and engagement (Jang, Reeve, & Deci, 2010).

In his high school Spanish classes, our example learner has a teacher who recognizes the class' interest in a Spanish language musical artist. This teacher chooses a song by this artist as a way to illustrate a particular piece of language. She sets up a fill-in-the-blank activity by listening, and makes certain the students will be able to complete the task with an appropriate word bank. She then helps the students see other uses for this vocabulary and grammar with examples from other related songs. By using this material, the teacher is supporting her students in two ways; first, she is signaling that she recognizes the students' interest, which shows a personal connection; second, she shows that she is willing to support them by teaching in the students' preferred way. This choice of material might signal both involvement and autonomy support. Further, by setting up the assignment in a clear and achievable fashion, she appropriately structures the activity to deepen the class' understanding of Spanish language. At the end, the high school learners in this Spanish class leave feeling that Spanish can be fun, interesting, and worth knowing.

So where can intrinsic motivation in learning a language take us? **Goal contents theory** will help us answer this question. According to goal contents theory, the quality of learners' goals, intrinsic or extrinsic, will largely determine how long learners will persist at a task. Learners' *intrinsic goals* satisfy students' basic needs which will improve their well-being and guide intrinsic motives. In language education they might orient learners toward making friends across cultures, travelling to new places, enjoying movies, music, and other cultural artifacts, or open new avenues for learning (Vansteenkiste, Lens, & Deci, 2006). *Extrinsic goals* are those set on short term rewards. Learners may follow peer pressure, seek to make money, or want praise from friends and parents. While these goals can motivate in the short term, they also can limit learners' ability to express

themselves in the long term. These goals are an outgrowth of the organismic integration process (see above) described in the mini-theory of the same name and nurtured by the other mini-theories (Ryan & Deci, 2017). From our story of the Spanish learner, perhaps his study abroad experience in high school required him to pass a language test in order to go to the country of his choice. If he does not get the required score, he will not be able to go, making this a high-stakes testing situation. While this motivates him to learn the grammar and vocabulary for the test, he neglects listening and speaking. He achieves the necessary score to go on his study abroad trip, but in the interim between gaining the required score and his flight overseas he has begun to feel complacent. He feels that passing the test meant he had sufficient skill to live in the country of his choice, but learns upon arrival that though he can accurately conjugate all the verbs in all of the tenses, he struggles with daily communication! He now reassesses his goals, not just wanting to pass tests, but also seeking to understand the complex nuances of communicating with Spanish speakers in this country. He creates new goals to be able to effectively survive in this new environment and sets about trying to learn the vocabulary and skills he needs to achieve these goals.

Our fictional learner seems to be quite positively oriented toward the process of learning a new language. His personality is one where he seeks challenges and is guided by an inner compass that pushes him toward learning. He has setbacks and struggles along the way, but largely works with his own initiative to motivate himself. Within the framework of **causality orientations theory** (Ryan & Deci, 2017; Weinstein, Przybylski, & Ryan, 2012), this young man seems *autonomously oriented.* He is not content to be controlled by outside forces and requirements, but instead resets his orientations according to his environment. Language learners of this type prefer to be self-starters, seeking their own path and self-regulating their learning processes (Sugita-McEown, Noels, & Saumure, 2014). Other language learners tend more towards a *controlled orientation*. These learners are often more passive, preferring to take direction from outside. They are more likely to respond to social pressure or external rewards (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Important for language learning, they may also show less positive attitudes toward other cultures (Duriez, 2011). Finally, an *impersonal orientation* may indicate that the learner does not believe any aspect of learning a language is within their control, perhaps because they feel failure is likely (Amoura, Berjot, Gillet, & Altintas, 2013; Kwan, Hooper, Magnan, & Bryan, 2011). These orientations represent a personality-centered approach to motivation (McAdams & Pals, 2006), where learners' orientations offer a glimpse into their more generalized functioning (Duriez, 2011).

Another essential question of motivation to learn a language is: who motivates us? What kinds of people in our lives motivate us toward language learning, and what is the nature of our connection to those individuals? **Relationships motivation theory** (Ryan & Deci, 2017) indicates that the relationships which meaningfully satisfy basic needs will help language learners to develop strong, lasting motivation. Given that

much of language learning happens through the communication between individuals (parent-child, friends, teacher-student, etc.), it follows that the quality of those relationships will change the way that learners are motivated (Guay, Ratelle, Larose, Vallerand, & Vitaro, 2013; Ratelle, Simard, & Guay, 2012). High-quality interpersonal relationships between individuals and within groups depend upon the individuals' ability to experience not only positivity or regard but also respect for autonomy (Ryan & Deci, 2017). More negatively, sometimes parents and teachers withhold affection when learners do not perform in a specified or desired manner. This practice is labeled *conditional regard*, and is associated with feelings of shame, fluctuations in self-esteem, poor coping skills, low self-worth, and resentment toward parents (Assor et al., 2004). Teacher conditional regard is also negatively associated with perceived psychological need satisfaction (Kaplan, 2018).

From our example, the Spanish language student develops close friendships with the host family during his summer study abroad program. Though he is older than the children, they come to enjoy showing him local customs and helping him achieve greater day-to-day proficiency in the language; he likewise enjoys sharing his knowledge and experience gleaned from greater life experience and school learning. By communicating with the father and mother, he begins to develop an understanding how to interact with different levels of social formality. In this multigenerational household, his younger host siblings model the appropriate forms of address and respect when they address their grandparents. Though he is often out of line with the local culture, his family is tolerant and patient, explaining to him his mistakes and helping him get the appropriate feedback to navigate the sometimes complex social interactions only visible to long-time insiders. Upon returning home, he often talks with his host family online. In university, he credits the connections he forged between himself and this family as one of the reasons why he wishes to pursue a degree in Spanish.

Though an idealized account, the vignettes attached to this discussion of a Spanish learner represent actual experiences of language learners we have known through the years. Each instance of this language learners' life story can be used to represent one of the mini-theories. These ideas overlap and intertwine— throughout, the ideas of each mini-theory can be seen even during the discussions of the other theories. According to self-determination theory, mechanisms by which motivation grows and flowers are all related, forming a dynamic whole that may be used to predict individuals' actions.

Predicting engagement: Sweet harmony

The final piece of this puzzle is engagement: the outcome state of action towards learning. In studying motivation, we often seek to use our understanding of how students' internal states and reactions to the world predict their actual behavior (Oga-Baldwin, 2019). Engagement, the actions that students take to improve their language ability, offers a clear outcome for students' internal, invisible needs, desires, drives, and motives.

Recent perspectives (Oga-Baldwin, 2019) have proposed that engagement is not only an outcome, but a dynamic midpoint, acting as an intermediary between the person and their environment. Work within the self-determination theory paradigm (Oga-Baldwin et al., 2017) has shown that engagement results from influences within each student (need satisfaction, intrinsic motivation) and from the social environment created by the teacher (autonomy support, clear structure). At the same time, studies have also shown that what students do in class influences how teachers react; teachers respond positively to more engaged students, and negatively to less engaged students (Skinner et al., 2008). Likewise, more engaged students are likely to feel more intrinsically motivated after they have engaged with the learning material; that is, actions in class predict their later intrinsic motivation (Oga-Baldwin et al., 2017; Oga-Baldwin & Nakata, 2017). More engaged students also show reciprocally higher self-efficacy, need satisfaction, and mastery goal orientation over time (Reeve & Lee, 2014). In all the studies mentioned above, engaged learners achieved higher test scores and grades.

An important dynamic input in the language classroom is how learners make the learning a foreign language their own. Many perspectives focus on the idea of learner agency (Mercer, 2011), and how language learners make the learning environment one that works for them is an important step in this process. The idea of agentic engagement (Reeve, 2013) helps define how learners generally, and language learners more specifically, contribute to make the classroom climate effective for their learning. Both through positively responding to teachers (Skinner et al., 2008) and through attempting to make the classroom environment match their needs (Reeve & Tseng, 2011), learners dialogically influence the classroom learning environments. The dialectical interaction between learners' and teachers' actions can help create the virtuous circles (or vicious cycles) of motivation in classrooms.

By the time the example Spanish language learner described above has reached university, he had experienced numerous positive and negative Spanish learning experiences. What primed his motivation was the sense of activity that came with his earliest memories learning Spanish; his elementary school class was a place where he could use the language and have fun. He willingly participated in class, sang songs and played language games, and developed very basic fundamentals with the language. In lower secondary school, he did his homework and paid attention in class, taking notes and actively practicing when given the chance. In high school, his teacher paid attention to his and his classmates' interest, giving him many opportunities to use the language. When given the chance to study abroad, he took it, and pursued opportunities to learn. Finally, when choosing a major he reflected on his language learning and how it had met his needs throughout his young life. By building a habit of active language learning, he created a path towards success.

Conclusions: The strong and the trusted

In this chapter, we have sought to outline the basic ideas of self-determination theory as a general theory of motivation, and illustrate how they apply to language learning. The six interdependent mini-theories relate to learners' engagement in a dynamic fashion, with the numerous elements inside the learners' minds and from the world at large working together to create motivation and action. According to this perspective, learners develop their motivation in response to the environment, to their previous actions and habits, and to their inner worlds. The elements of the intra-individual motives, the learning environment, and their interplay are common to many of the current language learning theories (Dörnyei & Ryan, 2015; MacIntyre & Doucette, 2010). The development of motivation for learning a language shares much in common with education, parenting, child development, and intercultural studies, as well as less obvious fields such as music, physical education and sports, and management, and ignoring findings from these fields is to ignore potentially insightful parallels. Though at first glance it carries the baggage of a culturally specific framework, SDT's range and broad applicability indicate that it can help define mechanisms and hypotheses for how language learners are motivated and thus how languages can be learned.

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