Competence need satisfaction in language learning (and beyond): Current state of the evidence and directions for exploration

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Abstract

According to self-determination theory, the need to experience competence is one of a well-recognized trio of basic psychological needs, alongside the need for autonomy and relatedness. Although often assessed at the activity level, the need for competence is met situationally when learners feel able to understand and affect the world around them. In language learning, this means the feeling of success firstly in the comprehension and then in the use of the new language. This situated, contextual sense of competence helps explain the complex and dynamic development of motivation within the language learner. In this review, we focus on the need for competence as it applies both theoretically and empirically to the study of learning a new language. Building on scholarship showing that competence need satisfaction is a powerful correlate of motivation in education generally, we survey the evidence for competence need satisfaction as a specific predictor of language learning motivation and achievement, with directions for future

exploration. We present a thought experiment for new methods and approaches to the measurement of competence in classrooms.

1. Introduction

Over the nearly five decades of its history, self-determination theory (SDT) has become one of the most established theories of human motivation. SDT researchers have used the theory to understand the reasons behind why people do what they do across a myriad of fields (Ryan, 2023; Ryan & Deci, 2017). Investigations based on SDT in language learning have expanded in recent years (Sugita McEown & Oga-Baldwin, 2019), documenting the applicability of its mini-theories and propositions in this domain (e.g., Al-Hoorie et al., 2022; Noels, 2023; Oga-Baldwin et al., 2022).

Stemming from the early work by White (1959), SDT theorists have offered competence as one of the equal partners in the triad of basic psychological needs, alongside relatedness and autonomy (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2017). At the same time, despite being a fundamental cornerstone of the theory, competence has often required less defense from SDT theorists than the more controversial need for autonomy (Ryan, 2023; Ryan & Deci, 2017). Ability beliefs, the perceptions and assessments that contribute to feeling confident and capable, contribute to how motivation to learn foreign languages develops. Perhaps the most comprehensible terminology for the idea of ability beliefs to lay readers can be found in the idea of competence – in this case, defined as the perception that one is able to be effective in one's environment and achieve desired outcomes.

The connections between competence beliefs and motivation for learning a new language are unsurprising. In many ways, self-determination and well-being in the educational sphere are necessarily tied to a sense of competence. National policies and international guidelines for foreign and second language education (e.g., ACTFL, 2012; Council of Europe, n.d.; MEXT, 2017) all indicate the need to build real-world communication skills. More personally and anecdotally, our own experiences with foreign languages indicate that we feel good about comprehending and using the language when tasks are within our level of ability. This may help explain how and why competence beliefs are so salient as part of the motivational and acquisitional process in language learning at all stages.

By speaking a new language, learners discover how they can comprehend and influence the world around them. The very act of expression in a new tongue

can feel like a satisfying accomplishment. Further, by gaining competence using this new language, closer personal relationships can develop (fostering relatedness), and learners may learn how best to align themselves and their environment and expand their choices (fostering autonomy). Such relationships reveal the interconnected nature of the three basic needs and thus the difficulty of discussing any single one need without including the other two (Printer, 2021). As has been demonstrated empirically, there appear to be compensatory roles for each of the needs, where meeting one need may help restore satisfaction of another (Radel et al., 2012). However, more generally there is a positive synergy between need satisfactions, explaining in part their typically high intercorrelations, especially at a domain level of analysis (Ryan & Deci, 2017).

Recognizing the mission of this special issue in identifying the unique contributions of ability beliefs, the goal of this article will be to outline the empirical background made through SDT scholarship for the need for competence in studies of education and language education. As noted, these contributions must always be contextually balanced with the other psychological needs that simultaneously support well-being and intrinsic motivation. Though the effects in different scenarios may differ, competence may be best understood as a piece of the whole that is greater than the sum of its parts (Skinner, 1995, 2023).

2. Competence as an organizing construct: Part of a larger framework

In order to clarify the scope and breadth of the effects, it is necessary to contrast competence need satisfaction with the other constructs of ability beliefs. The differences between these concepts matter (Marsh et al., 2019) and, like other overlapping but distinct constructs, theoretical and categorical definitions can provide meaningful grounding in the face of empirically murky questions (Skinner & Raine, 2022).

Competence need satisfaction differs from other ability-related beliefs in its immediacy. In theory, self-concept refers to a generalized belief in one's ability related to past performance (Marsh et al., 2019). Self-efficacy reflects a task-specific expectation of success (Bandura, 1997). According to SDT (Ryan & Deci, 2017), competence need satisfaction is most salient to individuals, particularly in the moment, addressing questions such as: "Do I feel capable right now?," "Can I complete this assignment on my own?," "Am I struggling with this task?" This need to feel able, that our efforts are having the desired outcomes and effects we want, helps feed our sense of well-being in the moment.

When students of language feel successful, for example choosing the right vocabulary, combining phrases and clauses using correct grammar, communicating

their message smoothly and efficiently, and understanding the responses of their interlocutors, he competence satisfactions are experienced. Subjectively, this important life satisfaction happens in the moment, and the SDT conception of competence need satisfaction (and frustration) reflects the way that learners perceive their ability to master (or fail to master) their world in the present. Of course, such moments can be aggregated in global measures (e.g., Chen et al., 2015) but the satisfactions of competence primarily happen in the here-and-now.

3. Basic psychological needs theory (BPNT)

The construct of competence is part of a larger theory known in SDT as basic psychological needs theory (BPNT; Ryan & Deci, 2020; Vansteenkiste et al., 2020). According to BPNT, people's optimal motivation and wellness require the satisfaction of three basic psychological needs: competence, relatedness, and autonomy. As noted, experiences of competence occur when learners feel capable of engaging in the task at hand (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Relatedness is satisfied when learners build meaningful connections with others (Furrer & Skinner, 2003). Autonomy satisfaction comes from a sense of personal endorsement and willingness to engage in an activity (Jang et al., 2009). The basic needs are supported or thwarted moment-to-moment, through differing types and qualities of interaction. Satisfaction of all three needs nurtures the inner resources to develop intrinsic motivation, internalize values, and sustain engagement (Ryan & Deci, 2017).

Basic psychological needs serve as a key link between environmental factors and the resulting motivational or behavioral outcomes in various settings, including education (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Language learning research also demonstrates this connection (Al-Hoorie et al., 2022). The satisfaction or frustration of these needs, experienced within the classroom environment, can trigger specific actions (Jang et al., 2016). Research supports the impact of need satisfaction or frustration on different types of motivation (Agawa & Takeuchi, 2016; Carreira, 2012; Hiromori, 2003; Noels, 2013), as well as the relationship between teachers' beliefs and students' self-confidence and coping strategies (Lou & Noels, 2020). Understanding these fundamental psychological needs is crucial for understanding the driving forces behind high-quality motivation in both language learning and the broader educational context.

Inductively, the evidence for autonomy, competence, and relatedness as basic psychological needs can be seen in the mounting research for their universality across cultures (Chen et al., 2015) and the negative results stemming from situations within which these needs are thwarted (Vansteenkiste et al., 2020). Additionally, Ryan and Deci (2017) make a deductive argument for these needs, recognizing

that human beings naturally develop toward better adaptation, integration, and self-coherence where possible. This perspective, called the organismic view (Deci & Ryan, 2000), would indicate that well-being and motivation are thereby nurtured by contextual supports for autonomy, competence, and relatedness. We grow strongest as people when we are able to feel effective, be with people we respect, when our principles and behaviors are in harmony (Ryan & Deci, 2020).

4. Criticism of basic needs in education: Theoretical and practical rebuttal

One criticism often leveled at self-determination theory as it applies to education concerns its generalizability. Some authors from a variety of thought traditions (e.g., Dever & Karabenick, 2011; Iyengar & Lepper, 1999; Schwartz, 2000) suggest that self-determination theory may not serve to explain motivation and achievement in all cultures, or even within some communities in WEIRD (western, educated, industrial, rich, democratic; Henrich et al., 2009) samples like those obtained within the United States. In spite of these criticisms, a number of meta-analyses have confirmed that these needs are relevant across cultures, with quite minimal moderation effects (see Ryan et al., 2022).

Other commentators further note that SDT focuses on student well-being as a primary goal (Ryan et al., 2023). Yet the variety of functions and goals of mass public and private educational systems make well-being only one of a plethora of intended outcomes, with some arguing that well-being in school may be of secondary or tertiary importance in comparison to achievement and compliance with authority (cf. Birbalsingh, 2016). Nonetheless, because need satisfaction and frustration predict higher quality engagement, they also predict academic outcomes, such as grades and other performance indicators (Howard et al., 2021).

It is clear that individuals often learn languages at different phases of their schooling and lives (Oga-Baldwin & Hirosawa, 2022). The SDT position is that this learning will be optimized when it is engaged volitionally. At the point of introduction, the motives may indeed be primarily extrinsic (e.g., a requirement to learn a "foreign" language), but by meeting basic psychological needs (such as the need for competence), educators can help learners develop more sustainable, autonomous motives. The intrinsic joy of the task, in this case using the new language, might not always be the most salient motive in school situations, but SDT holds that students can internalize and integrate motivation even when tasks are not fun or interesting, especially under need-supportive conditions. For example, Alivernini et al. (2023) showed that what differentiates motivation (and thus lower achievement) in low-income students is often not intrinsic motivation, but their reporting less identified motivation – personal value

for learning, which is cultivated within need-supportive school contexts. The power of SDT can be seen in elements such as the continuum of motivational regulations, its clear propositions for the formal relationships between the measurable elements, and the testable empirical hypotheses that come from these propositions (Ryan & Deci, 2017). The theory addresses the varied ways in which students are motivated and offers insight via supports for basic needs for how to move them towards more autonomous, internally driven motivation. It is true that well-being may not be the immediate salient goal in all classroom situations; teachers under pressure may indeed sacrifice greater well-being for the sake of perceived learning goals (Reeve, 2009). At the same time, basic need satisfaction strongly predicts intrinsic motivation and identified regulation (Bureau et al., 2022), which in turn simultaneously predict engagement, achievement, and well-being (Howard et al., 2021). These results confirm the view that both achievement and well-being work hand in hand with need satisfaction to promote fully functioning members of society.

The caricature of educational practices that fulfill basic psychological needs on the one hand while neglecting learning can thus be somewhat of a strawman. Moreover, need-satisfying education leads not only to achievement but also other positive outcomes, such as identity formation (Skhirtladze et al., 2019), pro-social behaviors (Tian et al., 2018; Wray-Lake et al., 2019), emotional regulation (Roth et al., 2019), and engagement with politics (i.e., voting and other democratic processes; Wüttke, 2020). Thus, basic need satisfaction generally, and competence satisfaction specifically, can assist language learners in fulfilling their capacity as members of a modern interconnected society.

5. Competence measurement and effects on learning

The satisfaction of basic needs (i.e., competence, autonomy, and relatedness) has been linked to adaptive motivation and learning outcomes in multiple studies (see Howard et al., 2021, for a meta-analysis across 26 educational outcomes). Among these needs, competence has been shown to have a particularly strong relationship with motivation and achievement in educational settings. The relationship between competence and self-determined motivation has been reinforced by related theoretical discussions of perceived control (Skinner, 1995, 2023), with empirical studies linking motivation and perceived control sub-constructs, such as self-efficacy (Fryer & Oga-Baldwin, 2019), perceptions of language ability (Liu & Oga-Baldwin, 2022), and self-concept (Chanal & Guay, 2015). In education generally, cross-sectional models have emphasized the importance of competence satisfaction as central to student learning (Levesque-Bristol et al., 2022). For example, in the context

of physical education, Vasconcellos et al. (2020) found that students' autonomous motivation was mostly associated with competence need satisfaction.

Instructors' support for competence satisfaction in the classroom comes in the form of *structure* (Reeve, 2014; Reeve et al., 2022). Teachers who provide adequate structure through guidance, clarity, and feedback increase learners' likelihood of acquiring the information (Hattie, 2023). In context, structure works alongside autonomy support to encourage students' active engagement and basic need satisfaction (Aelterman et al., 2019; Jang et al., 2010). Teachers may provide highly directive but simultaneously highly supportive structure using a combination of clear communication of expectations, helpful and supportive monitoring of progress, and contingent responsiveness to students' interactions (Mouratidis et al., 2022). These instructional practices form the external basis for meeting students' competence needs (Legault, 2020).

Though numerous studies have looked at the effect of competence on learning in Western contexts (Levesque-Bristol et al., 2022), Jang et al. (2009) indicated that students in Korea strongly associated competence need satisfaction in school with intrinsic motivation, engagement, and achievement. In the two quantitative models presented, two independent samples of South Korean adolescents were surveyed with regard to their perceptions of autonomy support and need satisfaction, with the four variables of achievement, engagement, intrinsic motivation, and proneness to negative affect modeled as outcomes. In both samples, competence was a strong predictor of all four outcomes, indicating its importance for the SDT models.

In a large-scale meta-analysis of the antecedents of motivation in educational settings that captured 144 studies from around the globe, competence need satisfaction had the strongest antecedent relationship with intrinsic motivation and identified regulation (Bureau et al., 2022). As noted by Bureau et al. (2022), this result may stem from the centrality of performance to life within schools. Yet autonomy satisfaction also contributed significantly, confirming its importance as a situational antecedent of motivation and well-being at school. Given the predictive power of intrinsic motivation and identified regulation for student achievement, engagement, and well-being outcomes (Howard et al., 2021), we infer that competence and autonomy need satisfaction plays a central role in processes of learning and well-being.

Traditionally, measures of competence need satisfaction have used self-report surveys (cf. Chen et al., 2015; Deci et al., 1981; Ryan, 1982; Ryan et al., 1991), including in studies of language learning (e.g., Noels et al., 2000; Oga-Baldwin et al., 2017). Although survey methods are often criticized (Fryer & Dinsmore, 2020; Zhang & Aryadoust, 2022), in this context, we are, after all, interested in the person's experience. Here importantly, people's subjective experience of competence

may not always match up with actual abilities. For instance, a new learner of language may be experiencing high efficacy, whereas a more advanced student (who presumably has more language ability) may feel low competence satisfaction in their studies.

More recently, innovative approaches have made use of stimulus reaction times to measure both feelings of success and a desire to be more successful. In the studies reported by Van der Kaap-Deeder et al. (2018), using a sample of Belgian university learners, measures of implicit association indicated that competence satisfaction and desire could be measured with traditional surveys as well as reaction times to specific competence-based stimuli recorded at or very soon after completing a task. Individuals more capable at the selected tasks more quickly categorized associations on a computer between words like "I am" and "skilled" or "I want" and "to be able," while the less skilled were quicker to categorize associations with phrases such as "I am" and "unable." This demonstrates the possibility of measuring competence in new and novel ways using a variety of measures, as well as accounting for learners' unconscious recognition of their performance and skill levels. This adaptation is much in line with modern thinking in language education as well (Al-Hoorie, 2022), leaving a clear bridge from general SDT to the specialized application in language education.

6. Competence-focus in language learning focused SDT models

We begin this section with a brief caveat. While there have indeed been a number of models using SDT in language learning which include competence need satisfaction together with relatedness and autonomy (e.g., Alamer, 2022; Oga-Baldwin et al., 2017; Zhou et al., 2023), in the interest of focus, we will solely highlight those that have isolated the effect of competence need satisfaction. Thus, studies which have treated all three basic needs together without teasing out the individual effects will not be discussed. Likewise, the studies discussed may indeed have many other merits beyond their treatment of competence, but in the interest of space, we omit these elements. Finally, although some studies have included other competence constructs, such as self-concept (Chanal & Guay, 2015; De Naeghel et al., 2012), self-efficacy (Fryer & Oga-Baldwin, 2019), and perceptions of reading, writing, listening, and speaking skills in the L2 (Liu & Oga-Baldwin, 2022), we will also not review these papers. Although they are indeed overlapping constructs, the theoretical differences between these more generalized forms of perceived control and the situational need for competence satisfaction are important (Marsh et al., 2019; Skinner & Raine, 2022) and beyond our current scope. In identifying the unique potential effects of the SDT concept of competence for language learning, we thus keep our focus solely on the papers that have measured it according to BPNT.

Specific to language learning, longitudinal studies of Japanese elementary school students have revealed that competence need satisfaction may be more stable over time than relatedness or autonomy. Comparing the three basic needs over the course of a semester, competence had the strongest autoregressive correlation, suggesting higher stability (Oga-Baldwin & Nakata, 2015). Given the nature of day-to-day relationships in school, and the need for students to receive regular and sustained autonomy-supportive instruction (Cheon et al., 2023; Reeve & Cheon, 2021), this is unsurprising; where students are faced with similar levels of challenges and tasks in their day-to-day schooling, interpersonal interactions in language classrooms may naturally go through a variety of highs and lows. Learners' individual perceived competence, the difficulty they perceive in thinking about and completing tasks may represent their underlying ability, connecting it with more trait-like measures of ability (e.g., self-concept or self-efficacy; Marsh et al., 2019).

In a study by Joe at al. (2017) on Korean university language learners, competence need satisfaction directly influenced both motivation and achievement. When comparing different models of language learning motivation and their causes, competence belief was a direct factor in language learning, while prior abilities (i.e., test performance) predicted the model overall. Importantly, even after taking prior abilities into account, competence need satisfaction was still a unique and significant predictor of achievement.

Previous research on self-determined motivation among Japanese language learners also highlights the importance of competence need satisfaction in predicting language learning outcomes. Consistent with the findings of Bureau et al. (2022), studies by Hiromori (2003) and Agawa and Takeuchi (2016) identified competence need satisfaction as the strongest predictor of both intrinsic motivation and identified regulation. These studies, conducted with high school and university students respectively, showed a striking similarity in results. Additionally, Carreira's (2012) research, along with her colleagues' (Carreira et al., 2013) work on elementary school students' intrinsic motivation for English, found competence to be a significant predictor and covariate, even though autonomy had a slightly stronger relationship with intrinsic motivation.

In a study of Canadian students learning Japanese as a foreign language, Sugita McEown et al. (2014) showed that teachers' competence support was a significant predictor of self-determined motivation. Teachers who provided competence support in the form of additional opportunities for language use and direct and specific feedback had students with greater autonomous motivation, higher motivational intensity, and a greater desire to continue learning Japanese. In a similar setting, looking at Canadian learners of French, Noels et al. (2019) tested a parallel process growth curve model and cross-lagged panel

model, looking (for one) at the reciprocal effects of competence on motivation and learning. The growth curve model showed that students' initial integrated regulation covaried with their competence need satisfaction, a relationship that grew proportionally. Higher intrinsic motives predicted change in competence over time as well. The final relationship was confirmed in the cross-lagged model, where intrinsic motivation at the middle of the semester predicted the sense of competence need satisfaction at the completion.

Most recently, a set of competing models for competence need satisfaction and self-efficacy were compared by Hirosawa et al. (2024). Japanese primary school students responded to surveys on both self-efficacy and competence need satisfaction in their classes. A series of models, including CFA, exploratory structural equation modeling (ESEM), B-ESEM, and S-1 models, were compared. The best fit for the data was found using an S-1 model, which indicated that competence need satisfaction was the generalized factor, while self-efficacy represented a specific case of that generalized factor. Confirming theoretical discussions by Skinner (1995, 1996, 2023) and Ryan and Deci (2017), the results indicate that when individuals make their forward-facing predictions about future success (self-efficacy), they couch these predictions in their immediate experience of competence need satisfaction (i.e., do they feel capable of the task in the moment). More importantly, the best predictor of achievement in the model was not self-efficacy, but rather perceived competence (Hirosawa et al., 2024).

Stepping back away from language learning again, these findings further indicate the importance of the elements of the circumplex model proposed by Aelterman et al. (2019). Central to a motivating, supportive learning environment, teachers can promote learning through the combination of autonomy support and structure (Jang et al., 2010). Structure supports competence (Legault, 2020), and is crucial to all parts of the learning process (Mouratidis et al., 2022). At the same time, learners' individual development in learning is never equal or even (Nuthall, 2005) and thus competence beliefs may similarly require differential attention.

7. Might competence need satisfaction indicate development? A thought experiment

Given that competence beliefs are also more stable (Oga-Baldwin & Nakata, 2015), predict more trait-like measures of ability (Hirosawa et al., 2024), and can reflect underlying performance skills (van der Kaap-Deeder et al., 2019), we recognize that competence beliefs might work hand-in-hand with students' development of actual ability in a chosen domain (Alexander, 2003). To address this developmental process of how competence beliefs for learning a language may be nurtured, we present a thought experiment for how learners integrate knowledge and experience.

As noted, higher perceived competence is a strong predictor of autonomous motivation (Bureau et al., 2022) and the acquisition of new knowledge (Levesque-Bristol et al., 2022). Students' implicit beliefs about their competence have also been assessed using SDT's framework (e.g., van der Kaap-Deeder et al., 2019), indicating a fit for further assessment using multiple methods.

Based on findings that competence need-thwarting may drive learners to have the need met (Sheldon & Gunz, 2009), and subsequent satisfaction can lead to the restoration of the need (Radel et al., 2011), we can hypothesize that occasional feelings of need frustration can at times have a motivational effect. The feeling of being unable to understand, or being misunderstood, might, in these situations, draw learners toward a desire to succeed after reflection on actions that will lead to success. Learners' sense of ability may be implicit and performance-dependent (van der Kaap-Deeder et al., 2019), and therefore their inability to perform may be attributable to weaknesses in specific knowledge or skill areas (Jeon et al., 2022). If the skills needed to overcome this deficiency seem within reach, the desire to overcome a specific failure in their language system might draw them to persist towards improvement. At the same time, it likely would do so only in conditions where need support was afforded, including adequate structure and support for autonomy.

Indicators of movement toward an internally held sense of competence would naturally then be dependent on the nature of task requirements. Language education researchers have long recognized the impact of task features on successful performance (cf. Bachman & Damböck, 2018; McKay, 2006; Nation & Newton, 2008), and language learners are often acutely aware of their specific shortcomings with regard to specific features of tasks (Fryer et al., 2014). With reflection and clear feedback as to the reasons for failures in performance, and the accompanying feelings of need frustration (e.g., van der Kaap-Deeder, 2019), these shortcomings can be used to assist students in their progress toward achieving their goals. These experiences can thus, at times, be motivating through the desire to have the need met (Van Assche et al., 2018), provided that learners are supported through the process towards ultimate success and feel the work necessary to meet the need is within their grasp (Legault et al., 2006).

The task features that lead to success and failure can be thought of in terms of the various linguistic and contextual factors of tasks. The most recent research on the subject indicates that this includes elements of learners' background knowledge, fluency, various linguistic abilities, and task demands (Jeon et al., 2022). A distinguishing feature of many language learning contexts is the differential backgrounds and exposure students come with. Prior knowledge levels have shown key connections between quality instruction, motivation, and ability beliefs (Fryer & Oga-Baldwin, 2019). For purposes of both pedagogy and empirical measurement of competence

need satisfaction in the moment and of achievement and ability, it may thus be useful to assess students' perceptions and attributions for their own shortcomings related to both these individual differences and variations in task features.

Developing skill at a task or subject follows a developmental trajectory (Alexander, 2003; Schunk, 2019; Willingham, 2020). In school settings, a sense of competence often draws from external sources reflective of performance (van der Kaap-Deeder et al., 2019). Recognizing that new linguistic knowledge flows from the environment toward the individual, the starting point of the language learning process is necessarily external and contingent upon others. Like organismic integration, a developmental perspective on learners' perception of competence could thus be seen as a process of moving from dependence on external sources of feedback to a more internalized sense of competence as language learners begin recognizing their capabilities in the moment of acting on their own. In defining the trajectory for the acquisition of language from a completely externalized sense of competence toward a more internalized sense of ability, this framework would call upon learners' knowledge of where they are and what they might need in order to better succeed at their learning.

The above proposition is currently undergoing empirical examination but offers theoretical and practical avenues for exploration. Teachers hope to see over time how learners express a more internalized sense of their abilities, with lower reliance on outside support. Through this, it could be demonstrated how learners show increasing development of their sense of ability as they internalize the skills that are taught in class. This may be especially important as the tasks and content become more demanding.

Future research into the topic of competence development might utilize methods such as parallel growth curves looking into learners' absolute level of ability (criterion-based achievement within a body of knowledge) as well as how their feelings of competence and competence satisfactions develop. Though researchers have posited that self-efficacy for specific tasks in language learning might be an appropriate way to model ability beliefs (cf. Harris & Leeming, 2021; Vitta et al., 2023;), from a theoretical standpoint, task specific ability beliefs might serve as a more appropriate measure of learners' feelings for the task in the moment (see Fryer, this issue, for a more complete discussion). Thus, future measures of task-based learning over time might best leverage feelings of competence need satisfaction as a way to understand learners' experiences in the classroom (Leeming & Harris, 2022). Moving forward, our own research indicates that forward-facing self-efficacy may present a special case of the more generalized competence need satisfaction (see Hirosawa et al., 2024).

Crucial to this conceptualization is the recognition that need satisfaction can be achieved at any level of absolute ability. A beginning language learner on

the first day of class given the task of saying the equivalent of "Hello, what's your name?" in a new language or selecting accurate true/false responses to basic questions may feel comfortable and capable in their ability given the right support level. Teachers can tailor even complicated tasks, such as storytelling (Printer, 2023), to learners' ability levels in order to fulfill this need. They might still feel an external need for support if relying on a friend, teacher, or text to complete this task. At the same time, they could feel fully integrated competence when they can respond to these uses of language without any assistance. Competence need satisfaction might therefore represent the alignment of the students' actual ability, their sense of ability, and the demands of the tasks at that level of instruction.

8. Conclusions

The need for competence is important for understanding how learners interact with their environment. Learners make constant moment-to-moment decisions regarding questions like "Can I do this?," "Is this too hard for me?," and "What do I need to succeed?" Recognizing that these contribute to that sense of competence need satisfaction, and that these needs must be used in balance, offers insight into how language instructors, and teachers more generally, can best provide instruction in their classrooms.

Though we have focused on competence need satisfaction in this paper, we reiterate that solely focusing on competence will not produce motivation and well-being. Meeting students' need to feel capable, pitching tasks just at their levels, and supporting them through to success are all likely to lead to better performance in students. At the same time, one cannot ignore the other basic needs of autonomy and relatedness when trying to understand or to build high achieving classrooms. Building meaningful relationships and supporting students' feelings of autonomy remain pertinent in improving learning and well-being (Reeve et al., 2022; Ryan & Deci, 2017).

In considering competence need-satisfying instruction, the structure and feedback that helps students to succeed (Legault, 2020) must naturally be responsive to students' development over time. Effective teachers have practiced this for time immemorial (Hattie, 2023), providing structure that allows for positive feedback at all levels of objective language abilities. Through meeting the basic needs in a balanced, developmentally responsive manner, teachers can meet students at their level and better provide instruction. Within SDT, paying even more attention to the nuances of fostering competence satisfaction will help language learners and language instructors feel a sense of ability and progress as they move through their courses.

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