

# Empowering Foreign Language Learners from the Perspective of Self-determination Theory

Xiaoping Mai<sup>a,\*</sup>, Tianzhu Liang<sup>b</sup>

School of Foreign Studies, Lingnan Normal University, Guangdong 524048, China

<sup>a</sup> 1125323123@qq.com, <sup>b</sup> 756921688@qq.com

\*Corresponding Author

**Abstract:** *Creating classroom environments that are enjoyable to students and motivating their learning can be a challenging task for teachers. Self-determination theory holds that intrinsic motivation leads to students' improvement of performance, engagement and well-being. How can language teachers ensure that their students develop a love of language and see it as a powerful tool for expression and change? From the perspective of self-determination theory, this paper puts forward corresponding strategies and suggestions on how to empower foreign language classes and stimulate students' intrinsic learning motivation, so as to meet students' basic psychological needs and improve students' learning efficiency and effect. Replicable activities and assessments are provided as well from the authors' experience that empower students' language learning.*

**Keywords:** *Self-determination Theory, Empowerment, Intrinsic Motivation, Language Teaching*

## 1. Introduction

In class, students are most engaged when they are involved in activities that they find interesting and exciting. They feel no pressure in these tasks and cannot wait to share their work with their classmates and teachers. These intrinsically motivated behaviors often occur during meaningful social tasks with others. Self-determination theory (SDT) holds that the intrinsic motivation generated by the achievement of learning results in positive learning and development outcomes. Many scholars have studied the relationship between students' intrinsic motivation and educational outcomes such as achievement, engagement, creativity, persistence and other factors (e.g., Guay & Valland, 1997; Niemiec & Ryan, 2009; Ryan & Deci, 2013; Amabile, 1996; Vallerand, Fortier & Guay, 1997; Davis, 2018) <sup>[1][2][3][4][5][6]</sup>. Thus, when teachers create a learning environment in the classroom that is based on student expression, meaningful language interaction, diversity, and authenticity, students do not feel powerless or unable to control their own outcomes, but rather empowered to meet their own needs and build relationships with others (Kirk et al., 2015)<sup>[7]</sup>. According to Zimmerman (1995)<sup>[8]</sup>, evidence of empowerment includes students' awareness of their own influence and voice, competence, meaning, choice, participation, and leadership. The similarities of intrinsically motivated and empowered student behaviors suggest a strong relationship between the two and the utilization of intrinsic motivation theory as a means of promoting student agency. The purpose of this paper is to illustrate the strong influence of intrinsic motivation in language learning on students' empowerment and expression and provide foreign language teachers with strategies that have a positive impact on intrinsic motivation.

## 2. Self-determination theory

Self-determination theory (SDT) is an empirically derived theory of human motivation and personality in social contexts. Individuals who are intrinsically motivated will perform an activity without external pressure simply because the activity itself is satisfying and interesting to do. Intrinsically motivated activities can stimulate behaviors such as adventure, curiosity and enthusiasm, which are derived from within oneself rather than from external control. Developed by Edward Deci and Richard Ryan (Deci & Ryan, 2000, 2002; Ryan & Deci, 2013, 2020)<sup>[9][10][3][11]</sup>, SDT contends that intrinsic motivation, well-being, and other positive outcomes are products of the fulfillment of three basic and innate psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Autonomy refers to an individual's control over his or her actions. An autonomous individual wants to perform the activity and have control over his or her actions during an activity. Autonomy can only occur when one's actions emanate from

within oneself and are one's own (Deci & Ryan, 1987)<sup>[12]</sup>. Competence involves an individual's knowledge of how to accomplish an outcome as well as his/her ability to perform the actions to achieve the outcome. Relatedness encompasses an individual's attempts to develop secure and satisfying relations with others. Deci and Ryan (1991)<sup>[13]</sup> believe these three innate psychological needs are reasonably exhaustive and help to explain a substantial amount of variance in human behavior and experience.

### 3. Language learning and SDT

Considerable research shows the usefulness of SDT in education generally. For instance, motivational orientations and engagement are linked to linguistic and communicative capital, as indexed by course grades and standardized test scores (e.g., Butler & Le, 2018; Pae, 2008)<sup>[14][15]</sup>. They are also associated with indices of positive psychological capital, including low anxiety and greater linguistic confidence (e.g., Lou & Noels, 2018)<sup>[16]</sup>. Some studies show that the relation between motivational orientations and outcome is mediated by engagement (e.g., Zhang et al., 2017)<sup>[17]</sup>. In sum, students who feel satisfied with their psychological needs are more self-determined and engaged in language learning and are likely to achieve academically, linguistically, and psychologically.

In a study by Noels, Clément, and Pelletier (1999)<sup>[18]</sup>, English-speaking university students learning French in an immersion program experienced enhanced intrinsic motivation, competence, and lower anxiety in an autonomy-supportive environment, while teachers perceived as controlling and not providing constructive feedback diminished intrinsic motivation. Students with heightened levels of intrinsic motivation for learning French tended to be more successful in and involved with the language immersion course. Another study by Kaur, Hashim, and Noman (2015)<sup>[19]</sup> provides further support for these findings by designing a detailed unit plan for sixth-grade English language teachers in Thailand to use in their classes. These teachers were trained to incorporate autonomy-supportive teaching behaviors into their own teaching. The results of the intervention program showed that teachers could be trained to teach in an autonomy-supportive manner and thereby promote students' interest, effort, relatedness and integrated regulation.

As described, research has demonstrated the relationship between autonomy, competence, and relatedness—the three basic psychological needs of SDT—and intrinsic motivation. In autonomy-supportive learning environments that enhance students' feelings of competence and relatedness, students are much more likely to exhibit intrinsically motivated behaviors such as play, exploration, and curiosity. In addition to skill development, basic need fulfillment has been shown to lead to improved performance, achievement, engagement, and creativity. By incorporating the tenets of SDT into planning and teaching, language teachers can maximize students' interest, engagement, and language achievement.

### 4. Strategies of need fulfillment

Empirical research has demonstrated the positive effects of basic psychological need satisfaction (autonomy, competence, and relatedness) on developing and maintaining intrinsic motivation and other outcomes. The following strategies are provided for language teachers on how to increase students' intrinsic motivation in classroom teaching.

#### 4.1 *Autonomy support*

Because every student is different and each brings their own opinions, beliefs, personal histories, and strengths to the classroom, expecting all students to learn and express themselves in one way is both contradictory and a disservice to students as language learners. Curricula and teaching that do not consider students as individual learners will not be supporting student autonomy or developing intrinsic motivation for language learning. Language educators should create an autonomy-supportive learning environment in which choice and freedom of expression are principal components.

Students should be able to follow their curiosity and interests and choose what they want to interpret, present on, and converse about in the target language. For this reason, autonomy-supportive classrooms are not inclined to be content- or assessment-prescriptive. Instead, students have choice in their comprehensible input and how they interpret it. Noels (2003)<sup>[20]</sup> found that native-speakers of English studying Spanish experienced feelings of autonomy and competence according to teacher behavior. Learning because it was fun was more of an autonomous feeling when the teacher seemed less controlling and when the students felt they had more choices. Because autonomy-supportive teachers integrate

student interests in their curricula, it is vital that teachers are creative, flexible, resourceful, and imaginative when planning for instruction. Students will recognize that their teacher validated their decisions and will feel that their learning arose of their own volition, leading to increased intrinsic motivation.

Based on the previous research studies, Reeve (1996)<sup>[21]</sup> developed a list of teaching behaviors that support students' autonomous behavior. He pointed out that teachers can promote students' autonomy and self-determination by: (a) understanding and appreciating students' points of view; (b) encouraging students' choices and initiatives; (c) communicating the rationale for any behavioral limits or constraints placed on students; (d) acknowledging that negative emotion is a valid reaction to teacher control; and (e) communicating in a noncontrolling style and providing positive feedback. In upper-level language classes with more independent students, teachers could split their classroom time between three areas: first, in independent research requiring interpretation and presentation based solely on the students' interests; second, in collaborative group work with peers in which students engage in a shared project; and third, in a whole classroom setting in which the teacher and students share a common focus.

#### ***4.2 Competence support***

One of the primary objectives of language educators is for students to develop into lifelong language learners and advocates. Students must feel effective and competent in their communication in order to feel prepared for future challenges. In order to do this, teachers must create learning experiences for students that are appropriately scaffolded and provide students with the optimal challenge. Furthermore, teachers need to provide students with feedback that is constructive and authentic while avoiding evaluative feedback and tasks that focus on grammar and form over meaning.

Focus on meaning over form. If students and teachers are too focused on form, just a few grammatical errors can disrupt an otherwise completely comprehensible language interaction, possibly resulting in future feelings of apprehension and anxiety. This can cause students to feel that their participation in the conversation or presentation was ineffective. An excessive focus on form can also lead to misconceptions about the purpose of language. According to Ellis (2014)<sup>[22]</sup>, engaging learners in activities during which they are focused on creating pragmatic meaning is intrinsically motivating. The successful transfer of meaning in a conversation can survive considerable grammatical and lexical errors; therefore, a greater focus on meaning can create a more competence-supportive learning environment for students.

Constructive teacher feedback. Often the only source of feedback language students receive is from their teacher. This gives weight to the importance of the quality of feedback language teachers provide, which depends largely on the type of tasks involved. Constructive feedback is more suitable for authentic, communicative tasks that acknowledge meaning over form. Evaluative feedback is suitable for grammar-focused, teacher-centered lessons in which students are learning about the language instead of using it meaningfully. Instead of viewing student work and language output from a perspective of deficit, teachers should treat what students say and write in the classroom as legitimate communication and respond constructively. This makes students feel that they are communicating effectively and that they can continue to do so in the future.

#### ***4.3 Relatedness support***

Students, like all individuals, want to feel a sense of belonging with others. Ryan and Deci (2002)<sup>[23]</sup> refer to this psychological need as a sense of being with others in a secure communion or unity. In other words, a student's intrinsic motivation may not be maximized if she does not feel cared for, safe, or respected by her peers or teacher. Because learning is a social process, language classrooms must allow students to feel comfortable expressing their opinions and beliefs in order to ensure effective language learning.

Safe environment. In addition to entering language classes with curiosity and interest, students may also develop some anxiety and misconceptions about how languages are learned. Students may believe that learning a foreign language is similar to other content areas in that accuracy is the most important factor in mastery, which may lead to a fear of speaking and taking risks for fear of failure. Teachers who provide constructive feedback and value meaning over form will be creating a learning environment in which students feel safe to communicate and express themselves. Students who feel safe to speak and cared for by their peers and teachers can experience lower anxiety, enhanced intrinsic motivation, and success in language acquisition (Krashen, 1982)<sup>[24]</sup>.

A student's need for relatedness can be satisfied through genuine interpersonal involvement with others such as teachers, parents, and peers (Furrer & Skinner, 2003)<sup>[25]</sup>. When Taiwanese teachers of English were asked to rate the importance of 48 motivational strategies, the strategies with the two highest ratings were 'Show students you care about them' and 'Establish good rapport with students' (Cheng & Dörnyei, 2007)<sup>[26]</sup>. At face value, both of these strategies appear to foster relatedness; thus, they would lead to increased intrinsic motivation. Teachers can foster relatedness in the classroom by developing sincere quality relationships with their students. Teachers might do so by showing an interest in students, caring about students, and dedicating their time and energy to students (Connell, 1990; Connell & Wellborn, 1991)<sup>[27][28]</sup>. It is important for teachers to be understanding and supportive and to create a classroom environment where students and their ideas are respected and not belittled (Furrer & Skinner, 2003)<sup>[25]</sup>.

## **5. Examples of classroom application**

In this section, we describe four examples of how we deliberately attempted to implement the self-determination perspective into one particular university course. All of the examples that follow were incorporated into an undergraduate English course at a normal university in the southern mainland China. The goals of the course were to help students acquire new vocabulary, language expressions, as well as to improve students' written and oral language communication skills.

### **5.1 Group surveys**

One enjoyable way of getting students to converse with each other in the target language is through surveys. For each unit, students are allowed to choose the related topic that they are interested in such as genetically modified food, flying cars, mental health, online courses during the epidemic, food safety, languishing and so on which are closely related to their own lives. By creating their own survey, students are also prepared to analyze authentic data sources such as graphs, tables that often illustrate comparisons. Students may feel more engaged in the activity due to its relevance and potential real-world application, as authentic materials have been shown to motivate second language students (Kienbaum, Russell & Welty, 1986; Peacock, 1997)<sup>[29][30]</sup>. The purpose of the task is not to evaluate and denote what is wrong, right, true, or not, but instead to dive critically into an interesting topic and allow the students to express their beliefs. After students finish the survey, teachers will create a poster session day in which students present their findings to the class in a casual, conversational way. Teachers can modify the complexity and requirements of the activity for the needs of their learners.

### **5.2 Culturally relevant teaching**

As the world becomes increasingly more diverse, the urgency of developing these intercultural skills within students is growing. Teachers should cultivate foreign language students to absorb the essence of world culture and at the same time deepen their knowledge and understanding of the excellent traditional Chinese culture. In class, students should be encouraged to challenge and disrupt misconceptions through critical thinking, conversations, and engagement with authentic and diverse resources. Teachers can make full use of multimedia equipment to carry out cultural teaching through various classroom activities. For example, students can introduce some historical places and natural landscapes of China in class. Students can watch documentaries that introduce British and American customs and history, supplemented by materials that introduce Chinese customs and history. Students can have classroom discussions and debates on some hot social issues between China and the West. Integrating the cultural explanation into the classroom not only enables students to know the basic situation of British and American countries, but also enhances students' cognition of the cultural differences between China and the West through comparative study and research. The purpose of this approach is to foster intercultural competence within students so they are better prepared to cross cultural borders.

### **5.3 Peer assessment-based group presentation**

Intermediate and advanced students should have a considerable amount of autonomy in their language classes. While one part of regular class time could be spent in interpersonal communication with other students and the teacher, students could spend time researching and preparing a presentation about something that is important to them during the rest of class. One method of assisting students in practicing both presentational skills and technical language use is peer assessment-based group presentations, in

which students present the group project that they find interesting and engage in in their free time. In order to engage every student, the teacher divides the students in each class into 10 groups, with 5 to 6 students in each group at the beginning of the semester. The students determine the specific content of their groups according to the theme of each unit.

Group presentation should be carried out in the last class at the end of each unit teaching. After that, the teacher gives each group a score sheet printed with evaluation criteria. After discussion and negotiation, the members of each group evaluate the works presented, and the teacher makes a brief summary. Students' classroom presentation activities are full of challenging and competitive, which to some extent changes the passive situation of students in class. Through such a role change, students are fully motivated and realize that they are the protagonists of the class rather than passive listeners. Group cooperation can guide students to take the initiative to study and explore, which is conducive to the cultivation of students' exploration consciousness and cooperative spirit, as well as the cultivation of students' oral communication strategies and problem-solving strategies.

#### **5.4 Performance-based assessments**

In contrast to tests and other evaluative assessments, performance-based assessments (PBA) encourage expression and allow students to “use their repertoire of knowledge and skills to create a product or a response, either individually or collaboratively” (Shrum & Glisan, 2016, p.370)<sup>[31]</sup>. Unlike old traditional assessment practices, in which feedback meant returning test scores to students, in performance-based assessment practices, feedback is considered an important tool to improve student learning and teacher instruction. Therefore, effective teachers commonly use PBA as a formative assessment tool to monitor and examine student progress from various perspectives and under different conditions during instruction. Teachers can introduce even more autonomy into these assessments by creating a performance-based assessment menu that allows students to choose how they would like to demonstrate their language proficiency and content knowledge. For example, after watching the film “Hi, Mom”, students can choose their task from the following menu: (a) Write a film review that shows your reflection and interpretation of themes presented in the film; (b) Design a poster that explains your interpretation of the film. The illustrations and writing must be your own; (c) As a group, create a mock newscast in which you interview one or two film characters about themselves and their experiences from the film.

Performance-based assessments include meaningful, challenging, and engaging tasks that simulate real-world contexts, and combine language abilities with knowledge and skills of different content-areas. This is because performance-based assessments require students to use higher-order thinking skills like analysis, synthesis, problem solving, and critical thinking in order to create the responses or perform the tasks (VanTassel-Baska, 2014)<sup>[32]</sup>. Besides, performance-based assessments evaluate not only the final outcome but also the procedures and strategies used to obtain that outcome. Through PBA, students' understanding and reasoning are tested to determine how well they can apply what they know (Glisan, Uribe & Adair-Hauck, 2007; Herrera, Cabral & Murry, 2013)<sup>[33][34]</sup>. Therefore, these evaluation instruments provide information in depth about students' knowledge and skills.

## **6. Conclusion**

It is crucial for teachers to maintain students' intrinsic motivation and encourage them to find meaning and satisfaction in the language learning process. Intentionally using self-determination theory to design activities in the foreign language course can be an effective way to create enjoyable and interesting classes. The examples provided in this paper reveal that teachers who modify their instruction and plan to promote intrinsic motivation will empower students' language learning. To expand the present study, it would be useful to go beyond specific classroom activities by examining other aspects of a course design like the types of assignments, the instructor's feedback, the grading policies and the general course rules and policies. These aspects of course design may provide a context that could affect students' intrinsic motivation for a particular activity. It is hoped that the explanation of self-determination theory provided in this paper and the examples of how it can be implemented in the classroom will be useful to teachers who want to empower their students' language learning.

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