

Self-Determination Theory and Second Language Research: A Match for Many Reasons

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Language acquisition is among the most interesting and complex arenas in which to study human motivation, learning, and educational strategies. Children of course, not only learn their first languages without need of external controls or rewards—they find energy and joy in the process. They are inherently drawn to speech, they love to play with sounds, words, and meanings, and they take interest in verse, song, and written expression. Parents watch this unfolding with their own joy and engagement, as they mimic and elaborate on their child's speech, read to them, and narrate events. Children growing up in multilingual environments will afford this stimulation and interest across languages.

Although acquiring a second language (L2), especially later in development, may be harder, that process can nonetheless also be one of growth and satisfaction. As several articles in this special issue confirm, second language learners can be highly intrinsically motivated, and thus positively engaged and highly persistent. Whether the language learning is self-initiated (e.g., Mynard et al., this issue), remote (e.g., Alamer, this issue) or school based

(Parrish & Vernon., this issue), the evidence suggests that the satisfactions of competence (feeling of growth and mastery) and autonomy (feeling volition and willingness) that are associated with intrinsic motivation are predictive of the sustained effort, practice, and patience needed for L2 success.

Yet for many an L2 student, learning that new language is anything but need satisfying. Often required in school before students have internalized the value of something so hard to acquire, L2 can be arduous and a “foreign” experience. Teachers often respond to this motivational issue with external prods such as requiring homework, frequent quizzes, and a focus on evaluations that can undermine intrinsic motivation. Complicating this picture further are the many differences in ability, exposure, cultural supports, and levels of engagement that students bring into the language classroom—unequal starting gates that are more salient in L2 than in other topics at school, making the instructor's job of motivating that much more challenging (see Parrish & Vernon., this issue; Zhang et al., this issue).

These daunting complexities and individual differences call for a differentiated view of motivation that has relevance across L2 settings and learners. It is thus with enthusiasm that I briefly introduce this special issue of JPLL: “Taking root: Establishing Self-Determination Theory as a fertile framework for the psychology of language learning.” The seven papers in this volume represent collectively an important building block in a growing, indeed flourishing, area of scholarship applying self-determination theory (SDT; Ryan & Deci, 2017) to language learning. SDT is a broad theory of motivation and wellness, the application of which to second language learning is particularly promising.

This “fit” of L2 and SDT is in part due to the epistemological framework of SDT: it is an empirically based theory with an openness to convergent evidence from both qualitative and quantitative sources. Although strongly founded in quantitative evidence, SDT relies on qualitative studies and field observations to add nuance and specificity to its explanations and applications (e.g., see Davis, this issue; Meristo this issue). SDT is also a self-critical approach: it is built around the vetting, testing, and refinement of its principles as they are applied in different domains, age groups, and cultures.

Beyond these methodological considerations, the congruence between SDT and L2 scholarship is substantive. It relates to the clarity with which SDT recognizes both intrinsic and varied extrinsic motivations simultaneously at work in effortful activities, a mixture of motives nowhere more evident than in L2 learning. For instance, despite the importance of enjoyment and interest (intrinsic motivation) in driving L2 learning (see Liu, this issue), success also typically requires an internalization of value (identification) to help power one through the more difficult, less “fun” moments of practice and learning. Each of these types of motivation have been well studied within SDT, including strategies for promoting them in the classroom and beyond (e.g., Reeve et al., 2022).

REFERENCES

Reeve, J., Ryan, R. M., Cheon, S. H., Matos, L., & Kaplan, H. (2022). *Supporting students' motivation*. Taylor & Francis.

Equally substantively relevant to L2 scholarship are SDT's universality claims: its argument that there are a small number of basic psychological needs essential to a thriving learner and/or to an engaging classroom climate. The issue of universality of SDT's premises are especially relevant to L2 research because across the globe, as people become more interconnected digitally and virtually, communicating with people from other cultures and backgrounds becomes more and more necessary. Principles that can apply across groups, cultures and educational systems thus can provide a scaffolding for building a practical and reliable L2 science that generalizes over language settings. SDT prescribes that L2 teaching strategies supporting autonomy, competence, and relatedness will commonly promote engagement, persistence, and performance across diverse cultures, language types, instruction medium, and age groups. SDT also tries to specify those practices connected to these satisfactions. This endeavor is clearly advanced by several papers in this special issue. Noteworthy too is that the importance of supports for autonomy, competence, and relatedness extends to L2 instructors as well, as Zhang et al. (this issue) discuss.

I must conclude with a personal note. I was pleased to see the dedication in the introduction by Oga-Baldwin, Parrish, and Noels to my longtime friend and colleague Edward L. Deci, occasioned by a half century passing since his initial studies on intrinsic motivation. I am confident that Ed will appreciate the depth of thought evidenced across these seven papers, and even more the diversity of analyses, critiques, and applications offered herein. It's exciting for us to see scholars in L2 not only use SDT, but to do research with the potential to reciprocally refine and elaborate the framework of SDT itself. There is no area of research and practice more likely to do so than this one, where the complexities of human motivation are on full display.

Ryan, R. M. & Deci, E. L. (2017). *Self-determination theory: Basic psychological needs in motivation, development, and wellness*. The Guilford Press.