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**Investigating Motivation in Language Learning
among University Students**

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Abstract:

Motivation, or the desire to learn, has been extensively studied for decades by many linguists and teachers because of its vast array of insights as far as language learning is concerned, and because of its acknowledgment as one of the most prominent factors in educational settings. In fact, we are living in an age where the desire to learn languages, and specifically English, has been pushed to its most explicit limit. In this article, I will talk about a study which I carried out with my third year students and which deals with some important aspects of SDT (The Self-Determination theory)- a theory that views motivation both intrinsically and extrinsically. Intrinsic motivation is a construct that reflects the human propensity to learn. However, extrinsic motivation is thought to reflect external control or self-regulation.

Keywords: *SDT, intrinsic motivation, extrinsic motivation, amotivation*

1. Introduction

In many kinds of educational settings, motivation is admitted, according to Öztürk (2012), as one of the most prominent affective factors, and numerous studies in the literature have demonstrated its great effects on teaching and learning process. Indeed, motivation¹ has been acknowledged by many teachers as one of the key factors that plays a significant impact in the success of foreign language learning (Dörnyei 1998). Motivation, indeed, provides the focal impetus to initiate learning the L2 and later the driving force to sustain the learning process. Without enough motivation, even individuals with remarkable abilities cannot achieve lasting goals. Besides, neither good curricula nor appropriate teaching are enough on their own to ensure student achievement.

What lies at the heart of this standpoint is the fact that motivation theory is a multi-layered construct, and the diverse approaches, as I will try to explain in the coming sections, demonstrate several aspects of its complex texture. It looks somehow surprising how little consensus there is in the literature as regards the exact meaning of ‘motivation,’ although the concept is a frequently used term in both educational and research contexts. According to Dörnyei (1998: 2), researchers “*seem to agree that motivation is responsible for determining human behavior by energising it and giving it direction*”, but a great variety of definitional accounts mentioned in the literature of how this may occur may let researchers in the field quite surprised. In this respect, Ryan and Deci (2000) point out that to

be motivated means *to be moved* to do something. A person who feels no impetus or inspiration to act is thus characterized as unmotivated, whereas someone who is energized or activated toward an end is considered motivated. Most everyone who

¹ In Ben Slimane (2008), I have explored at length the different scenarios of motivation as well as the manifold outcomes they yield. For example, I have focused on the motivations of preserving minority languages through technological tools, as they entail important insights to be disseminated.

works or plays with others is, accordingly, concerned with motivation, facing the question of how much motivation those others, or oneself, has for a task, and practitioners of all types face the perennial task of fostering more versus less motivation in those around them. Most theories of motivation reflect these concerns by viewing motivation as a unitary phenomenon, one that varies from very little motivation to act to a great deal of it.

Ryan and Deci (2000) further argue that a quick glance suggests that motivation is not a unitary phenomenon, as it may be thought of. In fact, many people have different amounts as well as different forms of motivation. That is to say that they differ in both the degree of motivation as well as the orientation of that motivation. Orientation of motivation revolves around the underlying aims that contribute to action. For instance, a student can be highly motivated to do homework out of interest or because he or she wants to have the approval of a teacher. In this article, I will attempt to make a qualitative study on the basis of some differing interviews I conducted with my third year students at the Faculty of Arts and Humanities of Kairouan, whereby I will explain the extent to which diverse forms of motivation can play a significant role in facilitating language learning, evaluate their success, as well as highlight the different implications that can be deduced from them.

2. Conceptualization of Motivation Theories within Mainstream Psychology

Öztürk (2012) points out that because of the significant impact of motivation on teaching and learning, several theories on motivational types have been suggested by scholars. In fact, motivational psychologists investigate what pushes people to move and why people do what they do, according to Pintrich (2003). More specifically, Graham and Weiner (1996: 1) maintain that

“motivational psychologists want to examine what the individual is doing, or the choice of behavior; how long it takes before an individual initiates the activity, or the latency of behavior; how hard the person actually works at activity, or the intensity of behavior; how long the individual is willing to remain at the activity, or the persistence of behavior; and what the individual is thinking and feeling while engaged in the activity, or the cognitions and emotional reactions accompanying the behavior.”

2.1. Expectancy- Value Theory

Expectancy of success has been repeatedly researched over the last decades, because it is claimed that “*we do the things best if we believe we can succeed,*” as Dörnyei (2001: 57) asserts. The expectancy of success is not sufficient if it is not accompanied by positive dimensions. Expectancy of success and values are intertwined and you cannot dissociate the one from the other. Therefore, motivational theories, based on these two terms, are called “expectancy-value theories” (Dörnyei, 2001).

2.2. Goal Setting Theory

Goal setting theory was developed by Locke and Latham (1990). This theory means that people should have goals to act because purposes trigger actions, and there should be goals that should be pursued by choice for action to take place.² Locke and Latham (2002) state that a goal is the aim of an action or task that a person consciously desires to achieve or obtain. Goal setting involves the conscious process of setting levels of performance so as to get desired results. O’Neil and Drillings (1994: 14), however, stress that “*the goal setting theory was based on the premise that much human action is purposeful, in that it is directed by conscious goals*”.

2.3. Self-Determination Theory

² This has been mentioned in Dörnyei (1998)—a comprehensive study about motivation in foreign language learning.

Öztürk (2012) points out that the self-determination theory, which was proposed by Deci and Ryan (2000), is one of the most influential theories in motivational psychology (Dörnyei, 2003). According to the theory, “*to be self-determining means to experience a sense of choice in initiating and regulating one’s own actions*” (Deci, Connell, and Ryan, 1989: 580). “*Self-determination is seen as a prerequisite for any behavior to be intrinsically rewarding*” (Dörnyei, 1994).

The theory divides motivation into intrinsic motivation, extrinsic motivation, as well as a state of amotivation. Intrinsic motivation is the result of an interest in the subject. In other words, it is the joy and satisfaction gained from doing something, as Littlejohn (2008) asserts. Extrinsic motivation results from some extrinsic rewards such as good grades or avoiding punishment (Dörnyei, 1994). Amotivation, however, is the state of lacking intention to act. It is owing to the fact that the individual does not value the activity, feel competent, or thinks that the activity is no doable, according to Öztürk (2012: 37).

2.3.1. Intrinsic Motivation

Intrinsic motivation, according to Ryan and Deci (2000), is viewed as the doing of an activity for some internal satisfactions. An intrinsically motivated person is pushed to act for the fun rather than because of outer pressures or rewards. It should be noted that the phenomenon of intrinsic motivation was first admitted when some empirical studies were conducted on animal behavior. Indeed, it was revealed that many organisms reflect some playful and curious behaviors, even when there was no reinforcement or reward at all, as White (1959) points out. One should mention, however, that these behaviors seem to be not carried out for some instrumentalities, but rather for some productive experiences linked to acting on one’s abilities.

2.3.2. Extrinsic Motivation

Ryan and Deci (2000) claim that despite the fact that intrinsic motivation is an important type of motivation, most of the activities people do are not, intrinsically motivated—this is especially the case after early childhood, as the freedom to be intrinsically motivated becomes limited by social demands that drive people to be responsible for non-intrinsic interesting tasks. In schools, for instance, it seems that intrinsic motivation becomes diluted, as one moves from one grade into another. In this regard, it should be highlighted that the Self-Determination theory proposes that extrinsic motivation is variable to the level that it becomes autonomous, as the following examples clearly demonstrate:

For example, a student who does his homework only because he fears parental sanctions for not doing it is extrinsically motivated because he is doing the work in order to attain the separable outcome of avoiding sanctions. Similarly, a student who does the work because she personally believes it is valuable for her chosen career is also extrinsically motivated because she too is doing it for its instrumental value rather than because she finds it interesting. Both examples involve instrumentalities, yet the latter case entails personal endorsement and a feeling of choice, whereas the former involves mere compliance with an external control. Both represent intentional behavior, but the two types of extrinsic motivation vary in their relative autonomy. Ryan and Deci (2000: 60)

2.3.3. Amotivation

With regard to the third important dimension of SDT, Pakdel (2013: 245) points out that ‘No motivation’ individuals are people who do not have any motivation at all neither inner satisfaction and joy nor external stimulus—something which would lead them to avoid carrying out activities and tasks. The so-called ‘No motivation’ concept, Pakdel (2013) further claims, can somewhat be similar to the concept of ‘learned helplessness.’ For example, when people are in a situation where they feel that what they are doing is not under their control, but rather under the control of external forces, they cannot really feel

motivated neither intrinsically nor extrinsically, and they end up choosing to avoid doing it.

3. Method of research

Participants: The interview was conducted with 22 university students, which included 5 male and 16 female participants whose average age was 24, as ages generally ranged from 22 to 26. As regards their geographical distributions, the students come from various towns of the Tunisian country, namely from Kairouan, Hajeb el Ayoun, S. Bouzid, Bizerte, and Mahdia. In this respect, it is important to mention that their geographical locations reflect a clearly mixed picture—something which is quite worthy of analysis, because of the different insights and important sociolinguistic dimensions they reflect.

Procedure: The participants were asked to give their opinions on issues relating to motivation, its major facets (intrinsic and extrinsic), and the extent to which they play a significant role in language learning, as well as the form of motivation that outweighs the other. This set of different opinions not only has a sociological dimension, but it is also considered of an utmost importance to check the validity of some important aspects of the SDT theory.

Results and discussion: An investigation of the results shows that half of the students think that motivation is the only straightforward reason for language learning, whereas the other half mentioned that there are other factors such as cognitive abilities, age, and personality, which are highly important to take into consideration. With regard to intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, as Table 1 below shows, there are about 15 students whose responses have shown that intrinsic is more important than extrinsic—something which makes up 68,18% of the total answers. However, 17 and 13 participants have respectively pointed out that both intrinsic and extrinsic motivations are key factors in language learning—

something which respectively reflects 77, 27% and 59, 09% of the responses provided. The fact that one finds that the answers provided are more remarkable with intrinsic than extrinsic shows that intrinsic motivation is more important than extrinsic.³

Questions Responses	Intrinsic motivation a key factor in language learning	Extrinsic motivation a key factor in language learning	Intrinsic motivation more important than extrinsic
Students who answered YES and respective percentage	17 77,27 %	13 59,09 %	15 68,18 %
Students who answered NO and respective percentage	4 18,18 %	7 31,81 %	6 27,27 %
Students who have no clear answer and respective percentage	1 4,54 %	2 9,09 %	1 4,54 %

Table 1: Intrinsic and extrinsic motivation

When asked to give a comment or a suggestion with regard to the interview conducted, one participant has said that: *“I think that you cannot dissociate extrinsic and intrinsic motivation...I think that intrinsic motivation is more important than the other... If you don’t like the language, you won’t be good at practicing it well or be skilled.”*

Another respondent has pointed out that

extrinsic motivation, stems from outside sources, such as student need to pass a test in order to satisfy a language requirement. In practice of course, people tend to have a variety of reasons, both intrinsic and extrinsic for what they want to learn, and different aspects motivate them at different times.

Since we are living in the so-called digital age, an age which has been characterized by a massive circulation of information and development of new

forms of technology,⁴ I have devoted a section of the interview to ask my students about the role of technology in language learning motivation. So, I have received 15 answers of the respondents, whose participation makes up 68,18% of the whole answers and who have argued positively and highlighted the highly facilitating role of technology as far as education is concerned in the sense that it makes learning more practical, easier, and accessible.

4. Conclusion

This article has attempted to investigate the underlying meanings of motivation with all its different configurations (intrinsic, extrinsic, as well as a state of amotivation), attempted to put the *Self-determination* perspective in a broader frame, and then tried to apply some of the theoretical underpinnings of SDT into practice by resorting to a systematic study of motivational patterns among 22 university students of English. The investigation has shown that intrinsic motivation is the most striking form of motivation, as it plays a role of paramount importance in language learning. The extrinsic form is also to be taken into consideration, but is given less importance than the intrinsic one. Besides, it should be noted that the state of amotivation is something very negligible in the process of language learning.

Another point that the study shows is the fact that apart from motivation, there are other factors such as cognitive abilities, age, and personality that can also be taken into account and researched to better visualize and optimize the scope of both language learning and teaching. Indeed, these parameters can be considered individually and be starting points for further studies on language learning. On the basis of Ryan and Deci's theory, one is tempted to say that the

⁴ Ben Slimane (2017) provides a detailed description of new technology tools, as they facilitate language learning and language preservation, in a context that has been shaped by a heightened sense of eclecticism, sophistication, and globalization.

self-determination theory is an important motivational theory that attempts to make the distinction between behaviors that are accompanied by autonomy and those that are accompanied by experience of pressure and control that are not representative of one's self.

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