

The Application of Self-Determination Theory in Promoting Language Learning Motivation

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Abstract: Language learning is the foundation of deeper learning. Maximizing the motivation in language learning can effectively improve our learning efficiency. As society becomes increasingly digitalized and intelligent, improving language learning efficiency is more urgent than ever. This article explores strategies to boost language learning motivation through the lens of self-determination theory. The author discusses how they stimulate language learning motivation by examining the three key factors of self-determination theory which are “autonomy, competence and relatedness”. At the same time, author discusses why these three basic psychological factors are crucial to meet our basic psychological needs. Interviews with foreign language learners provide insights into their experiences. The findings suggest that when learners' psychological needs are met, they experience reduced anxiety and increased intrinsic motivation, ultimately enhancing their language learning efficiency and social competitiveness.

Keywords: self-determination, language learning, motivation, interests, psychological.

1. Introduction

Self-determination theory is widely used in the field of psychology. It is usually used to study the motivations for the different behavior of different groups of people, including those related to conditions like ADHD and mental well-being during events such as the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic. However, this paper posits that self-determination theory can also be applied to education psychology, particularly in the field of promoting language learning motivation. Many individuals perceive language learning as tedious and challenging, which leads to a lack of motivation. According to self-determination theory, this lack of motivation stems from unmet psychological needs. Language learners may encounter “the affective filter” when they start to learn a new language, which means that they not emotionally comfortable, their brain will prevent them from trying to learn and speak a new language. For effective language learning, it is essential that learners feel comfortable and confident. Applying self-determination theory to language learning can meet language learners’ basic psychological needs, promoting the motivation of their language learning. When the three basic needs of human beings---Autonomy, Competence and Relatedness are met, different kinds of intrinsic and extrinsic motivations will emerge. Language learners can achieve their goal of stimulating language learning motivation by using self-determination theory in daily life. The central theme of this article is to explore how these three basic psychological needs promote language learning motivation.

2. Self-Determination Theory

2.1. Background

Self-determination theory is one of the most empirically supported theories in language-learning research. It emphasizes the significance of basic human psychological needs in human growth and development, encompassing autonomy, competence and relatedness.

Autonomy refers to the individual's ability to make choices and control their actions freely[1]. When learners engage in voluntary and self-regulated behaviors, they are more likely to experience happiness, which, in turn, enhances motivation. Learners are most motivated when they perceive value in a challenge or task. These feelings of success can satisfy the need for autonomy.

Competence is a sense of mastery that people have when successfully accomplishing tasks. When individuals' ability is obtained by the outside world, they are filled with motivation for future development. When individuals feel competent enough to meet a challenge, they will be more active in this activity. Thus, tasks must be appropriately challenging to captivate learners' interest. Moreover, the most important thing in the relatedness is the sense of belonging and social connection. It represents an individual's desire to be cared for, supported, and understood by others and establish social relations with others. If individuals want to get a sense of relatedness, they need social identity, emotional support and interpersonal communication. The satisfaction of this need for relatedness is central to the healthy growth and development of individuals. And only when these three basic psychological needs are met can we improve personal happiness and determination, so as to better devote ourselves to study, work and life [2].

2.2. Role in Education

In educational contexts, the roles of autonomy, competence, and relatedness become particularly important for fostering motivation. Independently learning is an important way of language learning. But when only the three basic psychological needs of the individual are met, then will people show independent behavior and motivation. And independently learning must be based on the motivation to learn.

General motivation can be categorized as intrinsic and extrinsic. Intrinsic motivation, a manifestation of autonomy, arises when learners deeply engage with the language, understanding its cultural context. Therefore, cultivating autonomy is very necessary for intrinsic motivation.

In addition, competence also influences in the generation of intrinsic motivation. learners who derive a sense of achievement from their efforts are more likely to be internally motivated. Confidence in their abilities further supports their language learning journey.

Relatedness plays a significant role in the classroom. When students feel secure and connected, they are more likely to engage actively in their learning. A strong sense of relatedness can stimulate motivation for cooperative learning experiences.

3. Applying Self-Determination Theory in Teaching to Enhance Language Learning Motivation

Different from the classrooms with strict rules, the practical application of self-determination theory to classroom teaching can maximize students' language learning motivation. Implementing autonomy, competence and relatedness in the classroom and can boost students' motivation to learn languages.

3.1. Autonomy

In order to improve students' self-learning ability and develop students' good learning habits, teachers should give students enough opportunities for independence. When there is an inclusive environment in the classroom to allow students to exert their learning methods or imagination independently, only then can they be motivated [3]. In language learning, students can independently explore the language and cultural background they are interested in as their own motivation to deepen language learning. Language is inseparable from social culture. If you want to understand a language, you must first understand its cultural background. Release students' nature and give them enough autonomy to choose how to learn and what to learn. Teachers can provide students with many types of learning activities and research content so that students can choose what they like independently. Everyone can be independent because of their own interests, hobbies and characteristics. They can choose their own way of learning.

At the same time, in language learning classes, teachers can put less emphasis on the language used by students. This means that students can choose the language they want to use to express their views instead of just using the language they are learning in the classroom. Especially in the classroom for multilingual learners. They can express themselves in their mother tongue. This can promote their learning of the new language. For example, for English learners, it is not necessary to wait until the English level reaches the perfect level to participate in a deeper classroom discussion. They can express the ideas about English in the language of their own choice, which can promote their English learning.

For instance, students can investigate language and cultural contexts that resonate with them, deepening their engagement. Teachers should also allow students to express themselves using their preferred languages, especially in multilingual settings. This flexibility can enhance their confidence in using the target language. For example, English learners can participate in discussions using their mother tongue until they feel comfortable expressing their thoughts in English.

On the contrary, traditional teaching methods often emphasize the pronunciation of words and the grammar of sentences. The students just kept repeating the teacher's pronunciation and do not form their own independent thinking. Language instruction should not adapt this mere factory-like process; rather, it should encourage authentic understanding and engagement.

3.2. Competence

Providing learners with an environment that can meet their competence, such as an environment full of challenges and competition, can maximize their motivation[4]. For example, teachers can set up some knowledge competitions that foster a sense of achievement and honor. However, this does not mean increasing the difficulty of language learning; rather language learning should begin with accessible content that gradually builds confidence.

In addition, in the language learning class, teachers should not just pay attention to whether the student's words are mispronounced and whether the grammatical structure is wrong, instead, they should focus on student's self-expression. Overemphasis on errors can undermine confidence, leading to increased anxiety. Teachers should cultivate a supportive environment that encourages students to articulate their ideas, showcasing their competence.

3.3. Relatedness

A sense of belonging can produce a sense of collective honor among language learners, enhancing motivation and performance in the classroom[5]. In daily teaching, teachers can foster language learners' sense of belongings and connection by setting up groups and create a positive classroom atmosphere. Each group has a competitive relationship, so every member of the group will study hard

for their own group. Groups can have discussions and communications, and gradually become tacit understanding and trusting each other. Therefore, relatedness invisibly can also stimulate students' motivation.

Additionally, students can only devote themselves to learning when they feel at ease. So, teachers should establish a harmonious relationship with students, along with giving necessary emotional support to students with special needs. Teachers should establish rapport with students, especially those with unique challenges, to create a safe space for learning. When students feel understood and respected, they are more likely to engage fully. Teachers can also establish a diversified classroom atmosphere in the language learning classroom. When there are students of different races in the classroom, they can incorporate different cultural elements from different countries of the world into the classroom decoration to help students of different races get a sense of belonging in the language learning classroom, such as hanging famous paintings of customs and special representative figures of different countries. Teachers can also hold class characteristic cultural activities on a regular basis. In such a positive classroom environment, students are more willing to cooperate and communicate with their partners. In this way, the contact between students will be closer and help them to study together.

4. Discussion

In the future, teachers can expand the development of the application of self-determination theory. Teachers should prior students' basic mental health to their grades to promote students' learning motivation. Personal enjoyment, social connections, and teacher support are crucial for fulfilling psychological needs. Autonomy is linked to personal enjoyment, while social enjoyment and teacher appreciation enhance students' sense of belonging. From the perspective of self-determination theory, meeting the three basic psychological needs of students will provide the foundation for students' learning motivation. An inclusive learning environment can significantly enhance motivation for students of different ages, races and genders.

5. Conclusion

Self-determination theory holds great potential in the education industry. Applying self-determination theory to language teaching can greatly improve the quality of language teaching.

Meeting the basic psychological needs of students from the perspective of autonomy, competence and relatedness can improve students' happiness and promote healthy personal growth. At the same time, it can also stimulate students' intrinsic motivation for language learning. This, in turn, fosters intrinsic motivation for language learning, enabling students to explore aspects of the language that interest them. It can also cultivate students' self-confidence to constantly meet new learning challenges and learn this language in depth.

By cultivating self-confidence and encouraging learners to embrace challenges, educators can transform language learning into an engaging and enjoyable experience. Future research will further explore the application of self-determination theory in language learning to ensure competitiveness in an era increasingly influenced by artificial intelligence.

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