

**Learning from Three Decades of Motivational Education:  
New Possibilities Revealed Beyond the Sustained Efforts Supporting Learner  
Growth**

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**Abstract**

This study examines the processes of trial and error in enhancing learner motivation and the evolution of educational perspectives on teaching experience. Focusing on strategies for fostering learners' intrinsic motivation in English education and intercultural communication instruction, this study explores their relationship with three key elements of intrinsic motivation in Self-Determination Theory (SDT): competence, autonomy, and relatedness. The challenges encountered, conflicts navigated, and insights gained throughout this process are analyzed in detail using specific examples. Furthermore, the impact of intercultural exchange on learner motivation is examined, emphasizing its significance. This study provides insights into effective motivation strategies for educators in educational settings and highlights essential factors for their professional growth.

Keywords: Teacher motivation Intrinsic motivation, Competence, Autonomy, Relatedness, Intercultural communication

## 1. Introduction

In recent years, interest in motivating learners has increased in the educational field. In particular, promoting intrinsic motivation is crucial for creating an effective learning environment (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Within the field of educational psychology, Self-Determination Theory (SDT) has identified three fundamental psychological needs—**competence, autonomy, and relatedness**—as key factors that enable learners to continue learning autonomously (Deci & Ryan, 1985, 2000).

However, in actual educational settings, simply applying theoretical frameworks does not always yield sufficient results. Learner motivation is influenced by various factors, including the educational environment, sociocultural context, and instructional methods. In addition, effective teaching strategies for low-motivation learners remain an ongoing challenge.

This study examined the author's 30 years of teaching experience to explore strategies for enhancing learner motivation. In particular, it examines how to support learners' competence, autonomy, and relatedness through the lens of Self-Determination Theory.

The foundation of this research is the author's early educator experience. Teaching was not a deliberate career choice but rather a result of circumstances. Entering the classroom without sufficient preparation and facing an imminent breakdown of classroom order, the author was compelled to take immediate action. Initially, he experimented with existing motivation theories and methods; however, the expected outcomes were not achieved, leading instead to a sense of powerlessness. Nevertheless, through a process of trial and error, he developed a deeper understanding of the mechanisms underlying learner motivation and gradually discovered more effective teaching strategies.

This paper first outlines the theoretical framework of motivation based on Self-Determination Theory. The study then examines the author's teaching practice in three stages: enhancing competence, fostering autonomy, and strengthening relatedness. Subsequently, it explores specific instructional strategies for promoting motivation followed by a discussion on the influence of intercultural exchange on learner motivation.

This research provides a case study of educational practices for low motivation learners and highlights the role of motivation in the professional development of educators. This study is expected to offer insights for educators seeking to implement more effective instructional approaches.

## 2. Phase I: Psychological Need for Enhancing Intrinsic Motivation (1) Competence

The public high school where the author was first assigned after completing graduate school had the lowest academic performance among the region. The educational methods acquired at university proved ineffective in this environment, as students exhibited little to no interest in lessons. In this regard, classroom behaviors such as eating, drinking, listening to music, and reading manga were common, and it was evident that the teacher's guidance did not reach these students. Additionally, many students failed to recognize the significance of learning, had become accustomed to low grades, and received minimal expectations from both parents and teachers. Consequently, an environment conducive to fostering motivation for learning was not in place.

These students were clearly forced to learn under conditions of extrinsic motivation or amotivation. Faced with the challenge of engaging students who demonstrated little interest in learning, the author frequently experienced a profound sense of powerlessness. Furthermore, in addition to the difficulties associated with classroom management, the mental burden of working on holidays because of responsibilities in sports club activities further compounded the challenges, leading the author to even contemplate resigning from

the teaching profession. However, recognizing the inherent responsibility in this role, the author began actively seeking ways to improve teaching strategies.

As part of this effort, the author explored theories and practical approaches related to motivation, thoroughly reviewed academic literature, and actively participated in educational conferences held in distant locations. However, many existing studies have primarily focused on students with high motivation, making them largely inapplicable to the context faced by the author. It was under these circumstances that the author encountered the work of Hungarian foreign language education scholar Zoltán Dörnyei (Dörnyei, 1990. 1994a. 1994b)). His research provided detailed descriptions of motivation strategies for students with low motivation, leading the author to consider these strategies as potential solutions.

The primary goal was to help students who were in a state of learned helplessness (Seligman, 1975) realize that they had the capability to improve their English proficiency. To achieve this, the author experimented with various motivation techniques, many of which prioritized building trust-based relationships with students through dialog rather than focusing solely on English instruction. This approach required significant time and effort because the process of fostering motivation required sustained engagement and repeated interventions.

Through continuous trial and error, notable progress was made after five years of practice. Five years later, within the same school, the author implemented instructional strategies that effectively enhanced students' motivation to learn, resulting in greater engagement and active participation in lessons. This practice was presented at an academic conference and was published in a scholarly journal (Seki, 1999). The research presentation became a turning point, opening new opportunities in educational research and ultimately leading to the author's transition to a junior college teaching position.

### **3. Phase II: Psychological Need for Enhancing Intrinsic Motivation (2) Autonomy**

After transitioning to a literature major college teaching position, the author initially believed that his practical exploration of learner motivation in high school settings had reached a milestone. However, by observing college students, he identified a distinct set of motivation-related challenges. The college where he was employed was highly regarded within the region, and its students demonstrated relatively high academic proficiency. However, many students exhibited a passive learning attitude, displaying a strong tendency to engage only in tasks explicitly assigned by instructors.

To further investigate this issue, the author conducted a learning awareness survey among the students (Seki, 2000). The results revealed that a significant proportion of students felt that they had not achieved learning outcomes commensurate with their abilities. Many respondents also expressed dissatisfaction with the instructional methods and the overall learning environment. In particular, numerous students attributed their lack of practical skill acquisition to issues with teaching methodologies and classroom conditions, frequently citing class sizes as excessively large. However, very few students engaged in self-directed learning beyond assignments mandated by instructors, highlighting a pronounced lack of autonomous learning behavior. This finding aligns with Self-Determination Theory (SDT), specifically the concept of "autonomy" as a fundamental psychological need for intrinsic motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

To address these challenges, the author implemented curricular reforms intended to foster students' self-directed learning abilities. Specifically, he emphasized the principle that "knowledge and skills can only be acquired through voluntary engagement and repeated practice; sufficient competence cannot be developed solely through externally directed

learning." Based on this perspective, he introduced instructional strategies designed to promote autonomous learning. A key aspect of this reform was the integration of learning strategy training within the curriculum, which enabled students to develop sustainable learning habits beyond the classroom and engage in self-regulated learning.

In practical terms, the author incorporated self-regulated learning principles into instruction, guiding students to take initiative in their learning through processes such as goal setting, learning plan formulation, progress monitoring, and self-evaluation. Furthermore, to support autonomous learning, he facilitated the development of a Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL) environment, which was considered advanced at the time. Additionally, he established an extracurricular learning support system, providing students with academic guidance beyond formal coursework. To further clarify the learning objectives, the author introduced the TOEIC exam—the first exam for the region—encouraging students to take the test and providing structured guidance on study methods to improve their scores.

Having sustained these educational initiatives for five years, students' engagement in independent learning increased significantly, leading to measurable improvements in academic performance and English proficiency across multiple indicators (Seki, 2006). These achievements have attracted considerable attention and have led to opportunities for the author to deliver lectures throughout Japan. Furthermore, to widely disseminate insights on motivational instructional strategies, he translated Zoltán Dörnyei's *Motivational Strategies in the Language Classroom (2001)* into Japanese, added his own motivational teaching practices, and published it in Japan.

#### **4. Phase III: Stagnation of Motivation and Reconsideration of Challenges**

The author assumed a position as an associate professor at a prestigious social sciences university in Tokyo, bringing with him the motivational teaching practices and successes achieved at educational institutions in northern Japan. Through years of experience, he accumulated practical insights into motivating learners and believed that he had established effective instructional methods applicable to a broad spectrum of students, ranging from high school learners with low motivation to university students with high academic abilities. However, upon transitioning to a new educational environment, he encountered an unexpected challenge—his previously effective motivational approaches did not yield the anticipated results.

Despite employing the same instructional strategies that have been proven successful in past educational settings, there was little noticeable change in the learning attitudes and responses of students in Tokyo. Although there were no significant issues regarding the comprehension of course content or completion of assignments, students displayed minimal engagement in learning, and no discernible improvement in intrinsic motivation was observed. This phenomenon did not manifest as explicit failure or resistance; rather, it emerged as a state of neutrality, where learning neither flourished nor deteriorated. Even when the author taught with enthusiasm, the student responses remained lukewarm, highlighting the ineffectiveness of conventional motivational strategies in this particular academic context.

Until this point, the author had found joy in stimulating students' enthusiasm for learning. However, the stark reality that none of his motivational techniques had any meaningful impact was profoundly unsettling. This sense of bewilderment and discouragement was further exacerbated by his own culture shock—the transition from northern Japan to Tokyo was not merely a geographical shift but also a psychological and professional adjustment that

significantly intensified the emotional burden. Confronted with the realization that the pedagogical methods he had refined through years of trial and error no longer applied to this new cohort of students, the author's confidence in his teaching abilities began to waver.

Moreover, perhaps influenced by the university's focus on social sciences, the author perceived those students exhibited limited interest in language itself. Many of the Tokyo students in this study approached the mandatory university English courses with vague motivations, such as the potential advantage for job hunting or the general convenience of knowing English, which, in a country like Japan where they can live comfortably using only Japanese, did not translate into a genuine commitment to learning.

Under these circumstances, the author was compelled to fundamentally reconsider the applicability of motivational theories in this educational environment. However, the inability to foster students' autonomous engagement in learning persisted. Gradually, the author lost confidence in his teaching methods, and this period of stagnation and uncertainty lasted for approximately five years—one of the most challenging phases in his career as an educator.

## **5. Phase IV: Reexamining the Role of Relatedness in Language Learning**

### **5-1. Reexamining Relatedness in Language Learning**

A pivotal moment in the author's teaching career occurred when he had the opportunity to accompany students on overseas training programs for several years as part of a liberal arts education program. The training program lasted approximately two weeks, and Nepal was selected as the destination. This decision was based on the country's educational significance, as it provided various critical themes—such as poverty, multi-ethnic coexistence, and intercultural communication—that were deemed essential for Japanese students to explore and understand.

During the program, students gained valuable insights and were deeply impacted by interactions with local communities. However, alongside their enthusiasm and newfound perspectives, they also experienced immense frustration due to their inability to effectively communicate. Some students were quite overwhelmed by this challenge. They shed tears and could not express their thoughts adequately. In witnessing this scene, the author was instantly reminded of his own experiences when he was 15 years old, recognizing the emotional struggles his students were experiencing.

At the age of 15, the author participated in an international exchange and homestay program in Indonesia, sponsored by the Japanese government. This experience was transformative because it sparked a profound interest in intercultural exchange. However, it also exposed the author's lack of knowledge about foreign cultures and his near-total inability to communicate in English, which resulted in a strong sense of powerlessness and frustration. This formative experience motivated him to engage in English language-learning, eventually equipping him to collaborate with diverse cultural backgrounds. Having seen his students face similar emotional challenges, the author gained a renewed understanding of the importance of relatedness in language learning.

Up to this point, the author had primarily considered interpersonal relationships within the classroom, focusing on teacher-student interactions, peer relationships, and connections between students and their families. However, he did not deeply examine the concept of relatedness in language learning, particularly in the sense of connecting with people who speak the target language.

According to Self-Determination Theory (SDT), relatedness is a fundamental component of intrinsic motivation and plays a crucial role in human learning and development

(Baumeister & Leary, 1995). This principle is particularly significant in language acquisition, where building meaningful connections with others serves as a powerful driver of motivation.

In Japan, where nearly all information is available in Japanese, learners have limited opportunities to engage in authentic language use. Consequently, many students struggle to develop a concrete purpose for learning English, often resulting in low intrinsic motivation.

Within the framework of Goal-Setting Theory, research suggests that clear and specific goals significantly enhance learner motivation (Locke & Latham, 2002). However, for many Japanese students, such goal-setting opportunities are scarce, as English education is primarily focused on exam preparation rather than fostering intercultural connections.

Following their participation in the training program, many students demonstrated an increased interest in learning English and engaging with global issues—a shift that occurred independently of external motivators. Rather than merely responding to grades or teacher expectations, the students began to discover their intrinsic reasons for studying English and learning about different cultures.

When autonomy, competence, and relatedness—the three core components of Self-Determination Theory—are effectively nurtured, learners develop strong intrinsic motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Many students who participated in the training program later became fluent English speakers and were actively engaged in international communication and collaboration.

Through this experience, the author reached a decisive realization:

*"When learners establish meaningful relationships with the people behind the language, learning ceases to be merely an academic obligation and transforms into a powerful tool for personal and professional engagement. The true essence of learning lies in relatedness."*

Following this turning point, the author's educational philosophy evolved from focusing solely on language skill acquisition to emphasizing the role of language in fostering interpersonal relationships across cultures. This transformation significantly influenced learner motivation and ultimately led to a fundamental reexamination of the purpose and impact of language education.

## **5-2. Aiming to Understand "Relatedness"**

The author himself had never lived in a culture outside Japan, and due to economic constraints, he had limited opportunities for long-term stays abroad. As a result, although he had theoretical knowledge of relatedness in intercultural learning, his practical understanding remained insufficient. Recognizing that effective guidance on relatedness requires lived experience, he felt a strong need to explore firsthand how relatedness is constructed in different cultural settings.

Motivated by this realization, the author left Japan for two years, living in Thailand and Nepal, where he had the opportunity to engage in educational practice in cross-cultural environments. In both countries, he was actively involved in developing and implementing international exchange programs, primarily for university students. Through these experiences, he gained a practical understanding of the significance of relatedness in education.

The experience in Nepal, a highly multi-ethnic society, was particularly eye-opening. Through interactions with Nepalese students, he observed that their attitudes toward cross-cultural understanding and acceptance of diversity were strikingly different from those of Japanese students.

In Japan, where opportunities to engage with different cultures are relatively limited, cultural barriers to building relationships are often perceived as significant obstacles.

Conversely, Nepalese students, having grown up in a multi-ethnic society, were naturally accustomed to coexisting with people of diverse backgrounds, and this profoundly influenced their values and interpersonal relationships.

By directly experiencing these cultural differences, the author gained a deeper understanding of how relatedness functions in language learning and educational activities. Moreover, these experiences not only deepened his cross-cultural understanding but also prompted him to redefine the concept of relatedness within educational practice.

Ultimately, this profound realization had a lasting impact on the author's educational philosophy, leading to the development of a teaching methodology that places a strong emphasis on cross-cultural exchange as a central component of learning.

## **6. Phase V: Interaction Practice with Diverse Others**

Teachers who had a deep understanding of the three key elements of intrinsic motivation in Self-Determination Theory (SDT)—autonomy, competence, and relatedness—tended to exhibit two distinct approaches in their educational practice. The first was the continuous implementation of international exchange programs based on prior efforts, and the second was an increasing focus on cultural differences and intercultural learning.

### **6-1. The Continuation and Evolution of International Exchange Programs**

The international exchange program that the author has been engaged in represents the culmination of the educational practices described thus far. It incorporates elements designed to satisfy three core components of intrinsic motivation—competence, autonomy, and relatedness. Students who participate earnestly in this program have opportunities to engage in self-reflection and deepen their learning through interactions with diverse others.

Convinced that such educational practices yield meaningful learning outcomes, the author's primary focus shifted toward refining the program itself. Consequently, the same methodological framework was repeatedly implemented in international exchange programs, and the initiative has been conducted more than 30 times.

However, through continuous implementation, it became evident that even when procedures and structures remained unchanged, the development and impact of the program significantly varied depending on the individuals involved. Even when identical activities were conducted in the same locations, new discoveries, emotional responses, and conflicts emerged, and these were shaped by the participants' cultural backgrounds and ways in which they formed relationships.

The dynamics of exchange between groups of different cultural backgrounds are inherently unpredictable and difficult to control entirely. This finding suggests that learning and awareness emerge through the process of interaction among individuals from diverse cultural contexts rather than through a pre-determined instructional design.

### **6-2. Deepening Interest in Cultural Differences and Intercultural Exchange**

Through his involvement in international exchange activities, the author has had the opportunity to interact with students not only in Japan but also in various Southeast and South Asian countries. Through repeated experiences, his interest in cultural differences and intercultural exchange deepened, and his research focus increasingly shifted toward intercultural communication alongside motivation theory. Consequently, in academic presentations and research activities, topics related to intercultural communication gradually took precedence over motivation research, reflecting the practical necessity observed in educational settings.

It also became evident that cultural differences significantly impact learner motivation. For instance, students from Vietnam and Nepal exhibited greater fluctuations in motivation compared to Japanese students, with their learning attitudes changing dramatically depending on contextual factors. The author empirically learned that without accurately assessing students' motivational states, teachers could not keep up with sudden shifts in engagement and enthusiasm.

These observations led to a stronger recognition of the necessity of considering cultural backgrounds when applying motivation theory. Prior research on cultural variations in motivation supports these findings.

- Triandis (1995) suggests that the ways in which autonomy, competence, and relatedness manifest, as well as their relative importance, may vary depending on cultural context.
- Chirkov et al. (2003) argued that while Self-Determination Theory is applicable across cultures, important cultural differences exist—for example, the support for competence is more critical in Western contexts.
- Goal-Setting Theory posits that clear and challenging goals enhance motivation; however, research indicates that goal acceptance and willingness to embrace challenges are influenced by cultural factors (Locke & Latham, 2002).
- Furthermore, research suggests that cultural differences affect how individuals commit to goals and translate those goals into concrete actions (Oettingen & Gollwitzer, 2001).

### **6-3. Development of Educational Practice Integrating Motivation and Intercultural Communication**

The insights gained from both practical experiences and research have been actively incorporated into daily teaching activities and university administration. At present, the author is responsible for courses in "Intercultural Communication" and "Multicultural Coexistence" at the university where he teaches. Additionally, he has assumed leadership roles in shaping the university's internationalization policies and multicultural education initiatives.

This evolution in educational practice has demonstrated the potential of integrating motivation theory with intercultural communication as a novel pedagogical approach.

Traditionally, motivation theory has focused on individual learners' psychological factors. However, through the educational practices examined in this research, the importance of adopting an instructional approach that incorporates cultural factors and interpersonal relationships has become increasingly clear. This broadened perspective not only enhances learner motivation in intercultural contexts, but also provides valuable implications for education in multicultural societies.

## **7. Discussion and Summary**

This study examined the author's 30 years of educational practice and its developmental trajectory through the lens of Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000). The first decade of teaching focused on satisfying learners' needs for competence and autonomy. In the subsequent decade, the author recognized the importance of relatedness in language learning and sought to integrate this understanding into educational practice. In the most recent decade, the concept of relatedness has been further expanded, leading to a growing interest in intercultural exchange and an exploration of its educational significance.

A key perspective emphasized in this study is that competence, autonomy, relatedness, and intercultural exchange are not isolated concepts but develop in close interrelation. For instance, the first five years of educational practice were dedicated to rebuilding competence in students experiencing learned helplessness. This foundation, in turn, enabled the promotion of autonomy in the subsequent phase. For learners who lack confidence in their abilities to succeed, it is extremely challenging to engage in independent learning. Thus, the enhancement of competence and autonomy is a prerequisite for recognizing the significance of relatedness. Furthermore, as the understanding of relatedness deepened, this perspective extended beyond classrooms to include cross-cultural interactions, leading to the exploration of new directions in educational practice. In this way, the author's educational approach has evolved continuously, with each stage building upon the knowledge and insights gained from previous experiences.

The author did not initially establish a clear research agenda or develop motivational strategies. Instead, he accumulated practical knowledge by directly engaging with challenges in educational settings, thereby responding to students' immediate needs. However, through 30 years of sustained practice, the author was able to systematize an educational methodology that effectively enhances intrinsic motivation and facilitates learning. Today, this approach has reached a level at which the author is confident in supporting the motivation of learners from diverse cultural backgrounds, particularly those in the Asian region, in alignment with their individual learning goals.

Moreover, these experiences have contributed not only to student development but also to the author's professional and personal growth. Through sustained practice, the author has expanded his interpersonal networks and communication skills, overcoming initial difficulties in intercultural interactions. Additionally, he has gained confidence in conducting international exchanges using English, a development that would have been unimaginable 30 years ago. This suggests that continued engagement in educational practice fosters the growth of both learners and educators.

The findings of this study highlight the potential for a novel educational approach that integrates motivation theory and intercultural communication, offering practical implications for the field of education. In particular, further research is needed to systematize educational methodologies that enhance intrinsic motivation and to evaluate the effectiveness of pedagogical approaches that incorporate intercultural relationships. As the saying goes, "Persistence is power", and in education, the continuous pursuit of effective teaching practices that nurture learner growth remains essential. The insights presented in this study can serve as a valuable resource for future educational initiatives.

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