

Motivation: Using the Self-Determination Theory in Foreign Language Classrooms

“Quite possibly the source of the motivation is very important in a practical sense to teachers who want to stimulate students’ motivation. Without knowing where the roots of motivation lie, how can teachers water those roots?” (Comfort, Agnello, & Santos, 2009)

This statement addresses one of my greatest concerns as a future language teacher, motivating my students to learn Spanish. Motivation as defined by Snowman, McCown and Biehler (2009) is the willingness of a person to expend a certain amount of effort to achieve a particular goal under a particular set of circumstances. In my future classroom, the ultimate goal for my students is to gain a better knowledge and appreciation for the Spanish language and culture. Although I can clearly articulate this to my students, understanding the ultimate learning goal is only half the battle of teaching. The question remains, what methods and strategies can I use to motivate my students to learn?

Motivation has been targeted by parents and teachers as the key explanation of whether or not children succeed at school (Guay, Ratelle & Chanal, 2008). Many educators believe that those individuals who fail to turn in assignments, refuse to participate in class and appear to make little or no progress in the content area are simply unmotivated. This assumption however is not true. In actuality, it is not that these students lack motivation; they are not behaving in the way the teacher would like. From my own experience as a student and from the insight I have gained through extensive research, I know that teachers can create circumstances that influence students to behave the way they want. The self-determination theory of motivation (SDT) is one theoretical approach that can be implemented into a language classroom to facilitate student motivation.

As a high school student learning Spanish, I was fortunate enough to be surrounded by peers who were just as intrigued by the language and culture as I was. Although each student in my class was motivated and successful in learning Spanish, their family backgrounds, traveling experiences, academic history and personal interests varied greatly. With so many differences between us, why did we all strive for such high achievement in the class? The one factor that each student had in common was our Spanish teacher who everyone held in high regard. In class we were presented with variety and choice on projects and assignments that addressed multiple intelligences and allowed us to work with different people. At any given point in the class period there could be students working on a skit, writing a song or making a movie which always kept class interesting and lively. We had independence in making these choices and input on what we wanted to learn and the goals we wished to accomplish. Our teacher also made it a personal obligation to build a connection with each student. We all felt comfortable talking to her about Spanish class and for myself as well as some others, our lives outside of school. Although I do not deny the significance of personal factors affecting students' motivation to learn, I do believe that teachers are one of the most significant factors that contribute to students' success in the classroom and that my high school Spanish teacher is a perfect example of this. By using aspects of the SDT- insuring autonomy, competence, and relatedness in her students- she positively affected her students' motivation for learning Spanish.

The SDT was introduced by Deci and Ryan as an elaboration of the intrinsic/extrinsic paradigm. (Dornyei, 1998). This theory assumes that inherent in human nature is the propensity to be curious about one's environment and interested in learning and developing one's knowledge (Niemi & Ryan, 2009). It emphasizes the importance of

intrinsic motivation- behaviors done in the absence of external impetus that are inherently interesting and enjoyable- and how external controls often undermine the feelings of enthusiasm and interest for learning and replace them with anxiety and boredom (Niemiec & Ryan, 2009). According to SDT, intrinsic motivation is sustained by the satisfaction of the basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence and relatedness.

Autonomy is the experience of choice and psychological freedom with respect to educational activities. Students who experience autonomy are self-organized and have a sense of choice over their behavior. The need for competence refers to the experience of efficacy while completing a learning task (Niemiec & Ryan, 2009). Students are competent when they feel able to meet the challenges of their schoolwork. The last psychological need, relatedness, refers to being connected to others. In the classroom setting, being connected to and satisfied with one's teacher will produce an optimal learning environment as it enables students to be more fully immersed in the learning process.

Numerous studies have shown the benefits of implementing the SDT in educational contexts. Results from a study conducted in an elementary school demonstrated that children assigned to autonomy-supportive teachers, relative to those assigned to controlling teachers, reported increased intrinsic motivation, perceived competence and self-esteem over time (Niemiec & Ryan, 2009). Another study that assessed seventh grade German students' experiences of interest in three school subjects showed that students' interest was enhanced for lessons in which teachers were autonomy supportive, whereas students' interest was diminished for lessons in which teachers were controlling (Niemiec & Ryan, 2009). Like the data suggests, when students' basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence and

relatedness are supported in the classroom, students are more likely to be intrinsically motivated and experience positive consequences in their learning.

By addressing these psychological needs in their classrooms, my Spanish teacher as well as other foreign language educators has facilitated their students in becoming intrinsically motivated to learn the Spanish language. In order to gain a more personal understanding of the SDT and its' implications in a foreign language classroom, I interviewed two high school Spanish teachers from my home town and also administered a survey to 120 students from a different district who are currently enrolled in a Spanish class. The results I obtained from both the interviews and surveys were consistent with my research on the SDT.

The first person I interviewed was my high school Spanish teacher, Amber Doering who had a significant impact on my decision to become a Spanish teacher myself. She was encouraging and enthusiastic about the language and the majority of her students have continued to study Spanish in college. I chose to interview Amber because of her success in motivating students.

According to Amber, the best strategy that she used in her classroom to motivate students was offering both variety and consistency on a day-to-day basis. Amber tried to include variety in her teaching instruction and in the class activities. She used different modes of presenting such as computers, projectors and student presentations to maintain the classes' attention and interest and also to appeal to different learning types. She almost always offered choice in student activities, projects and assignments to enhance the students' feelings of autonomy. Although there was always variety and student choice in the classroom, Amber also maintained some consistency in the daily schedule and for certain

tasks that were performed each quarter. The consistency and variety in Amber's instruction was to help her students feel competent. Because the schedule and some tasks were predictable from day to day, she felt that the students were able to function effectively in the environment. The different strategies in instruction and choice on activities appealed multiple intelligences so that each student had the necessary ability to be proficient in at least one of the activities and instruction methods. Amber also fostered student competence by providing adequate feedback- both written and verbal- on projects, exams and class participation. From my personal experience, hearing these positive and evaluative remarks from the teacher helped me understand what I was succeeding in or needed to work on and motivated me to continue learning. Many times Amber would talk to individual students after class to personally tell them they were doing a great job in class. The individual interaction was not only limited to discussing Spanish, but all school subjects and students' lives in general. She made an effort to know something personal about every one of her students like what extra curricular activities they participated in or their interests and hobbies. Amber also made it a point to share personal information from her life. She often mentioned her family and own traveling experiences in class and made it a point to attend school and community events in order to build a better connection with and fulfill the need for relatedness in her students.

Although Amber is no longer teaching, her previous students feel that the new teacher, Erin Lippert, has continued to have a positive influence on motivating the students to learn Spanish. Although both Amber and Erin agree that their teaching styles are different, their overall beliefs about motivating students are quite similar. Like Amber, Erin tries to create a sense of autonomy in her students by allocating variety and choice in class

assignments and projects. She makes it well known that she values the classes' input by creating lesson plans based on their areas of interest. To fulfill the need for competence, Erin explains that she does not expect perfection and that her students should not be afraid to speak Spanish and make mistakes. By doing so she hopes to give her students confidence that they can be successful in the class and to motivate them to take risks in their learning. Erin feels that it is important to create an environment that is fun, yet still challenging enough so that students must focus and work hard. Her intention in creating such an environment is for the students to feel comfortable and better able to relate with the teacher.

Amber and Erin have very similar beliefs about working with students. They have both been successful in motivating their students to learn a foreign language and have maintained enthusiasm for their field of work for many years. Their strategies used in the classroom and views on working with students address the components of the SDT and demonstrate positive consequences. The last teacher I interviewed (from a different school district) provided me with only very brief answers to my questions about motivating students. The survey I gave his students however, does offer insight into the SDT but differs from the positive consequences experienced in Erin and Amber's classrooms.

The survey I administered was designed to gauge students' motivation to learn Spanish and to find out how much the teacher influenced that motivation. The students were in grades seven through nine and all had the same Spanish teacher. I first asked students to rate their overall motivation for learning Spanish on a one to five scale. A one indicated no motivation at all and a five implied a very high desire to become fluent in the language. The majority of the students in grades seven through twelve said they were moderately motivated by marking the three on the survey. I was most curious about the students who

marked their motivation level as either a one or a five, and sorted my findings accordingly. I asked the students questions about receiving feedback to determine their feelings of competence, whether or not they had choice on assignments or input in class to understand their sense of autonomy and I inquired about their relationship with the teacher in order to gauge relatedness. Not surprisingly, those who said they were very unmotivated to learn Spanish gave negative comments to the following questions. When asked about getting adequate feedback one student wrote, “work gets graded but we never talk about why it’s right or wrong”. Another responded that the students have “no input at all in class goals and rules” and “no choice on assignments”. As far as relationships with the teacher, some believed they had a good connection but others were indifferent. One student stated “he’s a teacher, he teaches and that’s all” and another, “he lectures only, and does not make an effort to know anymore about us”. The students who marked their motivation as a five wrote more positive comments in the following questions than the students who indicated a low motivation level. The majority of these students stated that they had adequate feedback, although a few still felt like there was not enough. Surprisingly, the highly motivated students also felt like they had input in class goals and rules but that they still had no choice on assignments and projects. One student commented, “assignments are boring but projects are fun when we get the choice to work with friends”. Almost all of these students indicated that they had a normal or good relationship with the teacher. Although the teacher interviews and survey provided me with different perspectives, they are both consistent with SDT. The interviews and survey both demonstrate how learning tasks that are perceived to meet the psychological needs of autonomy, competence and relatedness are conducive to

student's intrinsic motivation, whereas controlling educational climates undermine intrinsic motivation.

According to SDT, by creating feelings of autonomy, competence and relatedness in my students, I will fulfill their psychological needs and therefore foster intrinsic motivation and student success. Through scholarly research, teacher interviews and student surveys, I have acquired various ideas and strategies based on the SDT that I will incorporate into my future classroom. One way I will support students' autonomy is by maximizing students' perceptions of having a voice and choice in academic activities. Administering interest surveys is something I would incorporate into my classroom in order to make sure I am including information in my lessons that are relevant and engaging to my students. I will vary my assignments, projects and instruction to include such activities as vocabulary practice, oral skits, culture lessons, games, music and actions so that each student is interested and feels competent enough to complete at least some tasks throughout the year.

Introducing learning activities that are challenging allows students to expand their academic capabilities leading them to feel more competent when completing various tasks. Larger projects that include cultural research and oral presentations are challenging activities that I will assign my students to encourage critical thinking skills and self-efficacy. Challenging activities are important for testing students' capabilities and knowledge but it is important that I include a balance between easy and difficult daily tasks. A central notion is that students will only engage and personally value activities they can actually understand and master (Niemic & Ryan, 2009). What is interesting and relatively easy for one student may be difficult for another and vice versa, it is my job to help all of my students feel as if they can be successful.

Feedback has been shown to be one of the most significant activities a teacher can engage in to improve student achievement (Hattie, 1992). The importance of feedback can be seen from the results of my student survey as the students who had low motivation for learning Spanish also felt that they did not receive adequate feedback from the teacher. Because of the information provided in research as well as my own survey results, I will work diligently to give my students feedback on assignments and other class activities. By doing so, I will emphasize student's feelings of competence by conveying relevant information on how to master the tasks at hand. Although I will not be able to give personal and detailed feedback on every assignment, I will try to write individual comments on students' papers as much as possible and especially on larger projects. Providing feedback is just one more way to enhance students' feelings of competence in my classroom.

Finally, the SDT and results from my own interviews and surveys postulates that the satisfaction of the need for relatedness facilitates students' motivation. To fulfill my students' needs I will do my best to create a positive relationship with them all and explicitly emphasize that I will always make time to talk about any issues they may be facing. One idea that I have in mind for connecting with my students is to have periodic *charlas* (chats). Students will be able to sign up for a meeting time to talk in Spanish about either my specific class, other school subjects or their lives in general. Small gestures such as greeting the students as they enter the classroom, seeing them out the door as they leave and making sure to give each student attention in class are other methods I will incorporate into my classroom. Research shows that students' who feel that the teacher genuinely likes, respects and values their identities are more likely to exhibit motivation for the learning task.

Although there is no single theory that explains all students' interest, teachers can create certain situations that both facilitate and hinder intrinsic motivation. By researching the SDT and applying its' assumptions to actual class experiences, I have a much more concrete answer to my original question about motivating students. By following the assumptions of the SDT, that is using strategies in the classroom to fulfill my students' needs for autonomy, competence and relatedness, I will create situations that facilitate student motivation.

HONOR PLEDGE

"On my honor, I pledge that I have not given, received, or tolerated others' use of unauthorized aid in completing this work."

Works Cited

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