Empowerment and Intrinsic Motivation: A Self-Determination Theory Approach to Language Teaching

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Abstract

Students enter into foreign language classes with one of the most powerful resources available to educators: their natural curiosity and innate love of learning. Self-determination theory contends that these indicators of intrinsic motivation lead to enhanced performance, engagement, and well-being (Niemiec & Ryan, 2009), or, in the context of language pedagogy, target language performance, proficiency, and intercultural competence. What can language educators do to harness and foster students’ enthusiasm, joy, and playfulness in language learning while reducing the controlling pressures they often feel at school? How can educators ensure their students develop a love for language and view language as a powerful tool for expression and change? This article provides an overview of self-determination theory research, recommendations for language strategies that cultivate elementary and secondary students’ basic psychological needs and increase intrinsic motivation, and replicable activities and assessments from the authors’ experience that empower student expression and choice.

Keywords: self-determination theory, empowerment, intrinsic motivation, language teaching

Introduction

People are most engaged when they participate in activities they find interesting and exciting. Nearly everyone has a hobby they engage in not because someone
tells them to, but simply because they enjoy it. This is also the case for schools and classrooms; students seem to lose themselves in tasks they enjoy and in which they feel no pressure. They lose track of time because they are so absorbed in their work and cannot wait to share what they have created with their peers and teacher. In the language classroom, students tend to exhibit these intrinsically motivated behaviors when they are involved in communicative tasks in which they are engaging meaningfully with other people. This motivation to learn and be involved occurs from within.

Self-determination theory (SDT) contends that intrinsic motivation, generated from the fulfillment of supportive instructional factors, leads to positive learning and developmental outcomes. Abundant research has demonstrated the relationship between students’ intrinsic motivation and educational outcomes such as performance (Benware & Deci, 1984), achievement (Grolnick, Ryan, & Deci, 1991; Guay & Vallerand, 1997), engagement (Niemiec & Ryan, 2009; Ryan & Deci, 2013), creativity (Amabile, 1996), self-esteem (Deci, Schwartz, Sheinman, & Ryan, 1981), and persistence (Vallerand, Fortier, & Guay, 1997). Due to these findings, a student’s intrinsic motivation can be a powerful tool for language educators in striving to develop students’ language proficiency and intercultural competence. Furthermore, when teachers cultivate a learning environment in which student expression, meaningful language interaction, diversity, and authenticity are essential elements, students will internalize the purpose of language as a critical tool for expression, connection, and change. Instead of feeling incapable and not in control of their outcomes, students will feel empowered to meet their own needs and build relationships with others (Kirk et al., 2015). According to Zimmerman (1995), evidence of empowerment includes students’ recognition of their own impact and voice, competence, meaningfulness, choice, participation, and leadership. The similarities of intrinsically motivated and empowered student behaviors suggest a strong relationship between the two and the utilization of intrinsic motivation theory as a means of promoting student agency.

The purpose of this article is to illustrate the strong influence of intrinsic motivation for language learning on student empowerment and expression. The authors propose that the cultivation of intrinsic motivation for language learning should be a principal objective for language educators due to its beneficial effect on students’ language achievement and non-cognitive skill development. The authors provide a rationale for this proposal in three ways: first, by considering relevant SDT research on intrinsic motivation; second, by documenting strategies for foreign language educators that positively influence intrinsic motivation; and third, by illustrating a selection of classroom examples that exemplify these motivational strategies. While the strategies and examples in this article can be beneficial to educators of students of any age or level, the authors have constructed them from their experiences with elementary and secondary students. It is the authors’ hope that these theoretical and practical considerations of intrinsic motivation may act as a lens through which language educators plan their instruction and engage with students in order to foster student empowerment.
Self-determination theory

Self-determination theory (SDT) is an empirical approach to investigating human motivation and growth centered around the factors that enhance or diminish intrinsic motivation. Individuals who are motivated intrinsically will perform an activity in the absence of external pressures simply because the activity is inherently satisfying, interesting, and fun to do. Intrinsically motivating activities inspire behaviors such as adventure, play, curiosity, and enthusiasm and originate from within oneself rather than from external control. This internal causation is referred to by Deci and Ryan (2002b) as one example of the perceived locus of causality (PLOC), or the origination of an individual’s motivation for a specific behavior. Consider students learning a world language; while some students engage themselves in target language (TL) communication in and out of class because they find it to be an inherently motivating activity (internal PLOC), others may feel overwhelmed and disinterested due to classroom restrictions, evaluative feedback, or other pressures (external PLOC). The feelings students experience while performing a behavior can vary greatly depending on the perceived origination of their motivation. This adds significance to the type of classroom environment and authoritative role teachers construct for themselves and their students.

Basic psychological needs

Developed by Edward Deci and Richard Ryan (2000, 2002a, 2002b; Ryan & Deci 2013), SDT contends that intrinsic motivation, well-being, and other positive outcomes are products of the fulfillment of three basic and innate psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. The cultivation of these three needs in a social context supports an individual’s intrinsic motivation and ability to function effectively. The needs are not hierarchical or sequential, but play an equally important role within an individual’s development and maintenance of intrinsic motivation. Additionally, they are not acquired through learning, acculturation, or socialization, but are apparent at birth and just as inherent to humans as physiological needs (e.g., food, water), and numerous studies have confirmed SDT’s cross-cultural, universal application and the positive effects of need fulfillment on individuals across a range of educational and career areas (Bao & Lam, 2008; Jang, Reeve, Ryan, & Kim, 2009; Tsai, Kunter, Lüdtke, Trautwein, & Ryan, 2008). While numerous works (Deci & Ryan, 2000, 2002a; Ryan & Deci, 2000) expound the following three psychological needs comprehensively, the authors express them in terms of their application at the elementary and secondary levels of education.

Autonomy. The first basic psychological need, autonomy, refers to the experience of one’s actions being their own and arising of their own volition. Individuals feel autonomous when they have freedom and choice in how and when they perform an activity. Students can feel autonomous when they have choice in what they learn, are able to create their own solutions, and feel free to express themselves and be creative. Autonomy is diminished when individuals feel their activities are controlled and limited, both through positive and negative control
such as punishment, surveillance, restrictions, and rewards. Despite being a staple of elementary and secondary classrooms, rewards can transform a student's motivation from inherent interest into external control (external PLOC).

**Competence.** Competence refers to feelings of effectiveness resulting from purposeful behavior. Individuals feel competent when they are able to meet challenges and feel that the intentions of their actions are fulfilled. Students can feel competent when they experience that their practice and hard work pay off, and that they have met a goal they set for themselves. Competence is diminished with negative, unconstructive feedback and the introduction of tasks that are inappropriate for an individual's abilities. Individuals with undermined feelings of competence can feel helplessness, inadequacy, a sense of failure, and that their actions and effort are ineffective.

**Relatedness.** The final need is relatedness, which refers to the inherent human “desire to feel connected to others—to love and care, and to be loved and cared for” (Deci & Ryan, 2000, p. 231). Feelings of relatedness emerge when one is a member of a group or has relationships with others. Students may experience these feelings of relatedness when they feel safe (physically and emotionally), respected, and valued by their peers and teachers (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Students internalize knowledge and practices not only because they are demonstrated by caring and respectful teachers, but to build a closer relationship with the environment in which these practices are common (Ryan & Deci, 2013). Relatedness is diminished in environments in which students are belittled, neglected, or feel disconnected from others.

**Outcomes of need fulfillment**

Empirical research has consistently demonstrated the positive effects of basic psychological need satisfaction (autonomy, competence, and relatedness) on developing and maintaining intrinsic motivation and other outcomes. In an influential early study by Deci (1971), rewards were found to suppress intrinsic motivation and effort, while lack of rewards enhanced them. In the study, university students were put into two groups and asked to complete a number of puzzles over the course of three days. In order to construct a measure of intrinsic motivation, the researcher—behind a one-way window—provided the groups with eight minutes of free time during each session in which participants could do what they wanted. The time the groups spent working on the puzzles during this free choice time acted as a measure of intrinsic motivation. On the second day, one group was told they would be paid for each puzzle they completed while the other group continued as they had on the first day. As expected, the reward group experienced a notable increase in free time puzzle work after being notified of the change. On the third day, the paid group was told that they could no longer receive money due to insufficient funding. The results demonstrated how the unpaid group gradually became more interested and efficient in completing the puzzles over the three days, even actively engaging with them when they believed they were not being observed; however, the paid group, after being notified of the change on the third day, spent considerably less time on and were less engaged with the puzzles
than both groups on the first day of the study. The study demonstrates the dangers of combining meaningful learning experiences with external pressures such as rewards and grades in schools.

Additionally, students expecting rewards from the completion of a task have been shown to exhibit less intrinsic motivation than both unrewarded students and students who were unexpectedly rewarded after the task (Kruglanski, Alon, & Lewis, 1972; Lepper, Greene, & Nisbett, 1973). A meta-analysis of studies investigating the relationship between rewards and intrinsic motivation provided further evidence that rewards in the form of verbal feedback increased intrinsic motivation, unexpected rewards and expected task-noncontingent rewards did not affect intrinsic motivation, and expected, task-contingent rewards diminished intrinsic motivation (Deci, Koestner, & Ryan, 2001). Similar external pressures such as threats (Deci & Cascio, 1972), deadlines (Amabile, DeJong, & Lepper, 1976), and competition (Reeve & Deci, 1996) undermine autonomy and, in turn, intrinsic motivation. In a study with elementary students by Koestner, Ryan, Bernieri, and Holt (1984), limits found to higher levels of intrinsic motivation than students exposed to controlling limits (e.g., “You can paint only on this small sheet of paper,...” [p. 239]). In addition, the group given controlling limits produced artwork with fewer colors and elaborations, less creativity, technical goodness, and artistic quality than the other two less controlled groups.

Similarly, evaluative pressures have been shown to diminish intrinsic motivation, while autonomy fulfillment increases intrinsic motivation and school achievement (Grolnick, Ryan, & Deci, 1991). At the postsecondary level, college students who learned concepts in preparation for an evaluative test showed significantly lower levels of intrinsic motivation and conceptual understanding than those who had learned in preparation for teaching another student (Benware & Deci, 1984). Need fulfillment can also affect creativity; research has shown that rewards (Amabile, Goldberg, & Capotosto, 1982) and task restrictions (Amabile & Gitomer, 1984) can lead to significantly less creativity in art projects than unrewarded and unrestricted student artists. Students’ feelings of relatedness also influence their motivation. Anderson, Manoogian, and Reznick (1976) found that children exhibited diminished intrinsic motivation when working on a task in which an adult stranger ignored them. Similarly, students who experienced their teachers as cold and uncaring demonstrated decreased levels of intrinsic motivation (Ryan & Grolnick, 1986), and students’ feelings of relatedness toward teachers, parents, and other students has also been shown to be a predictor of student engagement (Furrer & Skinner, 2003).

Language learning and SDT

Little research has been conducted on the role of SDT in the explanation of motivation in language learning. In a study by Noels, Clément, and Pelletier (1999), English-speaking university students learning French in an immersion program experienced enhanced intrinsic motivation, competence, and lower anxiety in an autonomy-supportive environment, while teachers perceived as controlling and not providing constructive feedback (competence frustration) diminished
intrinsic motivation. Students with heightened levels of intrinsic motivation for learning French tended to be more successful in and involved with the language immersion course. As consistent with previous studies, rewards and other external pressures did not support student effort or feelings of competence.

Another study by Noels, Pelletier, Clément, and Vallerand (2000) provides further support for these findings by shedding light on the correlation between intrinsic motivation and both integrative motivation—learning a language in order to build relationships with others—and instrumental motivation, “learning a language to get a better job or to fulfill an academic requirement” (Shrum & Glisan, 2016, p. 33). Language students motivated by the possibility of using the language during travel, to forge new friendships, to develop knowledge, and to explore new ideas exhibited more intrinsic motivation than students within the instrumental motivational orientation. Pae (2008) provided additional evidence of an instrumental-extrinsic and integrative-intrinsic correlation, as well as the mediating effects of self-confidence between intrinsic motivation and second language achievement in the Korean English as a foreign language (EFL) context.

**Intrinsic motivation in the language classroom**

As described, research has demonstrated the relationship between autonomy, competence, and relatedness—the three basic psychological needs of SDT—and intrinsic motivation. In autonomy-supportive learning environments that enhance students’ feelings of competence and relatedness, students are much more likely to exhibit intrinsically motivated behaviors such as play, exploration, and curiosity. In addition to non-cognitive skill development, basic need fulfillment has been shown to lead to improved performance, achievement, engagement, and creativity. Although few studies have investigated SDT in the field of language pedagogy, findings (Noels, Clément, & Pelletier, 1999; Noels, Pelletier, Clément, & Vallerand, 2000; Pae, 2008) show relationships between need fulfillment, intrinsic motivation, and language achievement, and are consistent with the comprehensive body of SDT research. By incorporating the tenets of SDT into planning and teaching, language educators can maximize students’ interest, engagement, and language achievement. The purpose of this article is to illustrate this relationship through classroom strategies and examples focusing on student learning and intrinsic motivation. Figure 1 on the next page provides a visual representation of the following strategies for elementary and secondary teachers (and potential student feelings) that result in increased intrinsic motivation and other positive language outcomes.

**Strategies for autonomy support**

Because every student is different and each brings their own opinions, beliefs, personal histories, and strengths to the classroom, expecting all students to learn and express themselves in one way is both contradictory and a disservice to students as language learners. Curricula and teaching that do not consider students as individual learners will not be supporting student autonomy or developing intrinsic motivation for language learning. Language educators should create
an autonomy-supportive learning environment in which choice and freedom of expression are principal components.

**Choice.** Students should be able to follow their curiosity and interests and choose what they want to interpret, present on, and converse about in the TL. For this reason, autonomy-supportive classrooms are not inclined to be content- or assessment-prescriptive in that they dictate the content students will interact with and how they will demonstrate their understanding. Instead, students have choice in their comprehensible input and how they interpret it. Because the primary goal of language teaching is to help students attain language proficiency, there should be an overwhelming instructional focus on TL immersion in an autonomy-supportive classroom. This input-rich language learning environment makes the themes and content of the course largely incidental to the course goal; following the tenets of Krashen’s Input Hypothesis, students will acquire the language over time no matter the content as long as it is appropriately scaffolded, relevant, and interesting. Krashen describes how “for optimal acquisition, input should be compelling, so interesting that students forget it is in another language” (2011, p. 1). Because compelling input will be different for each learner, an autonomy-supportive language classroom encourages students to play with and explore the input they find interesting.
Teachers can incorporate choice into their language classrooms by constructing broad curricular themes that encompass a diverse range of smaller thematic pieces. Although students will be working within a theme predetermined by their teacher (e.g., Technology, Friendship, Change), students will be able to choose the lens through which they would like to investigate that theme. One French student may examine the theme of Technology through researching social media use in France and Canada and comparing it to American youth, while another may look into video game development companies in French-speaking countries. By choosing to investigate what is interesting and compelling to them, students will be more engaged and intrinsically motivated, all the while operating in the TL. Additionally, teachers should not “allow” or “provide” choice for their students, but instead integrate it into all language experiences students encounter in class. Echoing the psychology behind autonomy, if students feel their expression is only a result of being allowed or expected to do so by their teacher, their feelings of intrinsic motivation may be diminished.

Another way of incorporating choice is by simply asking students at the beginning of the school year what they are interested in. If a majority of students indicate they are very interested in rap music and art, an autonomy-supportive teacher chooses to make these themes a centerpiece of the year’s curriculum by seeking out these authentic resources in the community or online and constructing learning tasks that incorporate them effectively. Because autonomy-supportive teachers integrate student interests in their curricula, it is vital that teachers are creative, flexible, resourceful, and imaginative when planning for instruction. Students will recognize that their teacher validated their decisions and will feel that their learning arose of their own volition, leading to increased intrinsic motivation. In upper-level language classes with more independent students, the language curriculum can be largely dictated by the needs and interests of the learners. Again, because language is acquired through meaningful communication, students should be able to choose the input that is most intriguing and exciting for them. Instead of having choice within a larger theme as autonomous younger learners would have, upper-level students could split their classroom time between three areas: first, in independent research requiring interpretation and presentation based solely on their own interests; second, in collaborative group work with peers in which students engage in a shared project; and third, in a whole classroom setting in which the teacher and students share a common focus.

**Freedom of expression.** In addition to having choice in their content and input, students should be able to have choice in how they express themselves in the TL. Students’ beliefs, opinions, and perspectives should play a fundamental role in contextualizing themes and eliciting communication for students. The World-Readiness Standards for Language Learning already integrate freedom of expression into the three modes of communication, in which students “share information, reactions, feelings, and opinions” and interpret and present “to inform, explain, persuade, and narrate on a variety of topics” (ACTFL, n.d.). In this way, students’ reactions, feelings, opinions, and identities should be recognized as invaluable instructional content that will promote communication.
Student communication in the TL “is a personal process, one that makes them find appropriate resources, whether those are material resources or their talents and strengths in the classroom” (Glynn, Wesely, & Wassell, 2014, p. 5). This suggests that student voice should be considered just as relevant to language learning as other traditional resources.

By focusing instruction on student expression, teachers will naturally incorporate themes and tasks inherently welcoming to diverse points of view. Teachers can also modify existing themes and lessons to allow for student personalization. Novice students are especially inclined to relate content to themselves through describing likes and dislikes and how the content appears within their life. Novice language learners need tasks that allow them to contextualize the content through their experiences and opinions. To do this, teachers of novices should make sure that their lessons move students beyond memorization and, instead, encourage student output through personal responses with no one correct answer. In a fourth grade Spanish lesson recorded by Annenberg Learner and ACTFL (2004), the teacher used basic forms of self-expression as the context for a lesson on fruits of the Americas. While some students eagerly exclaimed, “Si me gusta!” after trying a pomegranate for the first time, others responded in disgust, “No me gusta!” Students’ expression of their beliefs is not only encouraged, but required for the success of the lesson. The video provides an example of an autonomy-supportive lesson in which students’ subjective experiences are valued.

**Strategies for competence support**

One of the primary objectives of language educators is for students to develop into lifelong language learners and advocates. Students must feel effective and competent in their communication in order to feel prepared for future challenges. In order to do this, teachers must create learning experiences for students that are appropriately scaffolded and provide students with the optimal challenge. Furthermore, teachers need to provide students with feedback that is constructive and authentic while avoiding evaluative feedback and tasks that focus on grammar and form over meaning. This can be facilitated by engaging students with interactive language experiences incorporating authentic resources and communication with native TL speakers.

**Focus on meaning over form.** If students and teachers are too focused on form, just a few grammatical errors can derail an otherwise completely comprehensible language interaction, possibly resulting in future feelings of apprehension and anxiety. This can cause students to feel that their participation in the conversation or presentation was ineffective, when, in reality, they may have been successfully communicating meaning to others. An excessive focus on form can also lead to misconceptions about the purpose of language. According to Ellis (2014), “engaging learners in activities during which they are focused on creating pragmatic meaning (and, therefore, treating language as a tool rather than as an object) is intrinsically motivating” (p. 34). The successful transfer of meaning in a conversation can survive considerable grammatical and lexical errors; therefore, a greater focus on meaning can create a more competence-supportive learning environment.
for students. Additionally, as students feel more comfortable using the TL, the class will slowly transform into a more language immersive environment, in turn providing more comprehensible input from a larger variety of students.

**Authentic language experiences.** One of the most effective ways of fostering feelings of competence within language learners is by providing contact with native and non-native speakers of the language. If a greater focus on meaning between students and their teacher can provide a boost in feelings of competence, then an authentic and effective conversation with a highly proficient speaker of the language would be an invaluable experience for a student on their path to bilingualism. Besides face-to-face communication, students can also partake in video calls or emails with students at an exchange school in another country or through other interpersonal language services such as TalkAbroad. If these types of native speaker connections are unavailable, this can be partially emulated through the inclusion of authentic resources such as videos, podcasts, and texts (see Gilmore, 2007). Students feel competent when they experience that the effort they put into communication and interpretation was effective and that meaning was successfully conveyed (despite some errors) with individuals who use the language on a daily basis.

**Constructive teacher feedback.** Oftentimes the only source of feedback language students receive is from their teacher. This gives weight to the importance of the quality of feedback language teachers provide, which depends largely on the type of tasks involved. Constructive feedback that recognizes students’ hard work, validates their choices, and adds to the conversation a student has started is more suitable for authentic, communicative tasks that acknowledge meaning over form. Evaluative feedback that states the correct answer and tells students what they did wrong is suitable for grammar-focused, teacher-centered lessons in which students are learning about the language instead of using it meaningfully. Instead of viewing student work and language output from a perspective of deficit, teachers should treat what students say and write in the classroom as legitimate communication and respond constructively. This makes students feel that they are communicating effectively and that they can continue to do so in the future.

**Strategies for relatedness support**

Students, like all individuals, want to feel a sense of belonging with others. Ryan and Deci (2002) refer to this psychological need as a “sense of being with others in a secure communion or unity” (p. 7). In other words, a student’s intrinsic motivation may not be maximized if she does not feel cared for, safe, or respected by her peers or teacher. Because learning is a social process (Vygotsky, 1978), language classrooms must allow students to feel comfortable expressing their opinions and beliefs in order to ensure effective language learning. Teachers must also acknowledge students’ multifaceted diversities in their materials, tasks, and style of instruction. A uniform approach to instruction will only fulfill some students’ needs for relatedness in a diverse classroom.

**Safe environment.** In addition to entering language classes with curiosity and interest, students may also enroll with some anxiety and misconceptions about how languages are learned. Students may believe that learning a foreign language is similar
Empowerment and Intrinsic Motivation

To other content areas in that accuracy is the most important factor in mastery, which can result in apprehension to speak and take risks due to fear of failure. Language classes with a significant communicative component, yet a heavy focus on form and accuracy, may still suffer these same obstacles. This connects directly to the role of competence in language learning; language educators who provide constructive feedback and value meaning over form will be creating a learning environment in which students feel safe to communicate and express themselves. Because this type of teacher embodies this approach to language learning from the first day of class, students will also begin to internalize these values and add to the supportive atmosphere of the class. Students who feel safe to speak and cared for by their peers and teachers can experience lower anxiety, enhanced intrinsic motivation, and success in language acquisition (Krashen, 1982).

Culturally relevant pedagogy. Culturally relevant pedagogy, sometimes referred to as culturally responsive teaching, is an approach to teaching that utilizes “the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning encounters more relevant to and effective for them” (Gay, 2013, p. 50). The purpose of this approach is to foster intercultural competence within students so they are better prepared to cross cultural borders. As American public schools become increasingly more diverse, the urgency of developing these intercultural skills within students is growing. Culturally responsive educators not only respect and care for all students, but they also create a classroom environment where differences are celebrated, students feel welcome, and cultural and racial perspectives are used to analyze content and themes in the TL. A culturally relevant language educator constructs a curriculum that encourages students to challenge and disrupt misconceptions through critical thinking, conversations, and engagement with authentic and diverse resources.

By allowing students to bring their own perspectives to the class, lessons will become more relevant and engaging for all students, resulting in increased feelings of relatedness and intrinsic motivation. Culturally relevant pedagogy is particularly effective for students of marginalized and underrepresented cultures because it brings their voices and perspectives to the forefront of instruction. In addition to encouraging their students to incorporate diverse attitudes and beliefs into their language output, teachers can represent the diversity of their students and TL cultures in their choice of materials. Teachers should be mindful of how their existing materials reflect the diversity of both their students and speakers of the language and be purposeful when searching for new materials for their instruction.

Examples of classroom application

Many of the following strategies and instructional examples have been created and used by the lead author while teaching at a diverse urban high school in the southeastern United States. Although originally intended for use in a German classroom for students at the proficiency levels mentioned, they can be modified and adapted for use in classrooms of any language, grade level, or language level. Connections to self-determination theory, intrinsic motivation, and the three basic needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness are noted in parentheses. It the authors’ aim to assist
readers in internalizing these theoretical connections so that they may be used as an additional lens for constructing learning experiences for students.

*Contextualized assessment menus (all levels of proficiency)*

In contrast to tests and other evaluative assessments, performance-based assessments encourage expression (autonomy) and allow students to “use their repertoire of knowledge and skills to create a product or a response, either individually or collaboratively” (relatedness) (Shrum & Glisan, 2016, p. 370). While traditional assessments tend to be decontextualized and evaluate students on what they did wrong, performance-based assessments allow students at all proficiency levels to create language through application and the creation of a product or performance (competence). Teachers can introduce even more autonomy into these assessments by creating a performance-based assessment menu that allows students to choose how they would like to demonstrate their language proficiency and content knowledge. Table 1 provides an example of a performance-based assessment menu that could be used after watching, interpreting, and discussing a German film in the Novice and Intermediate levels.

**Table 1.** Example of Performance-Based Assessment Menu for a German Film for the Novice/Intermediate Levels Targeting the Presentational and Interpretive Modes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group Size</th>
<th>Assessment Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td><strong>Comic Strip (25 points):</strong> Create a comic strip with at least four windows that explains your interpretation of a scene in the film. The illustrations and writing must be your own.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2-3</td>
<td><strong>Newscast Interview (50 points):</strong> As a group, create a mock newscast in which you interview one or two film characters about themselves and their experiences from the film. This can be performed in class or be prerecorded.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2-3</td>
<td><strong>Art Exhibit (50 points):</strong> As a group, create five illustrations that depict scenes from the film and present them to the class. Be prepared to answer questions about your illustrations from the class and explain your design choices.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Limiting assessment choices through a menu can provide younger, novice learners with an attenuated focus and an age- and level-appropriate amount of choice.
Empowerment and Intrinsic Motivation

Options should reflect students’ learning styles (e.g., kinesthetic, mathematical, aural), interests (e.g., drama, technology, art), and group size preferences (e.g., individual, pairs, groups of three) (relatedness). Teachers can also adapt the overall theme of a menu to fit a specific mode of communication with which students need more experience. Additionally, if a number of assessments are shorter and less involved, students can combine them as long as they finish with the required point value.

Teachers can incorporate even more flexibility into performance assessment menus by encouraging students to create their own menu items. In a German 1 class, one student approached the lead author with an idea to use his favorite video game as a means to present to the class in German (autonomy, relatedness) (see Figure 2). The student then recorded his game footage and personally narrated over the video in German, binding his TL utterances with the visuals in the video. This allowed the student to fuse his personal interests with the development of German presentational skills.

![Figure 2. One novice-level student's novel idea of presenting a story in German through the visuals of his favorite video game. This image is being reprinted with permission of the copyright holder.](image)

One enjoyable way of getting students to converse with each other in the TL is through surveys. Not only do students reinforce some previous learned themes (e.g., free time activities, food, clothes, school, etc.) (competence), they also make interdisciplinary math connections and have choice in the purpose of their research (autonomy). By creating their own survey, they are also prepared to analyze authentic TL data sources such as graphs, tables, and infographics that often illustrate cross- and intra-cultural comparisons (relatedness). Teachers should work backward from an authentic graph to introduce phrases of frequency (e.g., once a week, three times a day, pretty often, very rarely, etc.) to prepare novice students for asking their main survey question. The teacher should plan...
a day for data collection in which students ask a certain number of classmates their question(s), such as “How often do you eat fast food?” or “What time do you wake up?” and collect the data. If possible, students could create handouts to ask students from other classes and levels to broaden the scope of their findings, as well as create an online survey to send to an exchange school in another country (competence). Students may feel more engaged in the activity due to its relevance and potential real-world application, as authentic materials have been shown to motivate second language students (Kienbaum, Russell, & Welty, 1986; Peacock, 1997). After students have collected their data, they can use Microsoft Excel to create a graph that illustrates their results. Teachers can create a poster session day in which students present their findings to the class in a casual, conversational way (relatedness). Teachers can modify the complexity and requirements of the activity for the needs of their learners.

**Visual fairy tale interpretation (Novice High – Intermediate Mid)**

The interpretive mode encourages students to form their own opinions about an authentic text or resource. In this intermediate task, students are shown an authentic minimally-animated video rendition of a Grimm Brothers’ fairy tale, *Die Sterntaler* (The Star Money) (KTVnetwork, 2007); however, the film is shown without sound or narration. Because it is a black and white film with very simple animations, the characters, story, and meaning are all open to interpretation (autonomy, relatedness). Students work with a partner to create their own narration and present to the class. In order to include an interpersonal connection, the teacher can facilitate a full class discussion in which students compare and contrast their perceptions of individual scenes and the lesson learned from the story. Although a video of a German fairy tale is the example used here, any video or selection of images can be incorporated into this interpretive activity.

**Planning a group vacation (Novice Mid – Intermediate Mid)**

In this culminating task for a thematic unit on travel, students work in groups to plan a three-day trip to a German-speaking country and present their trips to the class. Each group chooses a traveler group type and budget at random (e.g., the wild teachers, the business trip, the students on a budget). Students must describe their flights (cost, flight times and dates, origin and destination), where they stayed (cost and description of hotels, hostels, or other lodging), and one trip on the train (cost and departure and arrival times, dates, and locations), as well as two activities and one meal per day (cost, location, details), all while adhering to their budget. Students should be encouraged to have fun with the language and go beyond these basic requirements. Teachers should provide students with useful TL websites for booking flights, trains, hotels, and hostels (competence). Students have complete freedom in how they plan their trip (autonomy). While some students with a higher budget prefer to stay in four star hotels in Berlin and eat at the fanciest restaurants, others may opt only to eat Döner Kebab (an inexpensive Turkish street food sandwich) and Currywurst (curried sausage—another popular street food option) and buy tents so they are able to sleep in the park. Because meaningful and compelling use of the TL is the goal, the choices they make as
Empowerment and Intrinsic Motivation

a group create an iterative cycle of TL use; as students make choices based on their interest, they feel more intrinsically motivated to talk about it and continue making more choices (autonomy, competence). Students must remain in the TL during the entire planning and presentation process, which they complete in class on their smartphones or in the computer lab during three to four class periods. The students present as a group on the final day. In order to facilitate improvisation and presentational skills, students may only include pictures, prices, and titles in their slideshow. Students should be assessed primarily on authentic criteria which enhance feelings of competence such as comprehensibility and meeting content requirements (competence).

**Discussing internet friendships (Intermediate Low – Advanced Low)**

Comprehensible input should be so compelling and relevant that students cannot help but speak. In this group or whole-class task, students discuss the question, “Are Internet friendships real friendships?” With the growth and pervasiveness of social media use and technology, many students feel and are connected with people on the Internet whom they have never met. This task brings their real-world experiences to the classroom (relatedness). The purpose of these discussions is not to evaluate and denote what is wrong, right, true, or not, but instead to dive critically into an interesting topic and allow the students to express their beliefs (autonomy). Students must trust each other and their teacher and feel comfortable to share their thoughts (relatedness). Teachers can adapt this discussion to fit into a larger theme or a selection of authentic texts and videos.

**Process presentations (Intermediate Low – Advanced Low)**

Intermediate and advanced students should have a considerable amount of autonomy in their language classes. While one part of regular class time could be spent in interpersonal communication with other students and the teacher, students could spend time researching and preparing a presentation about something that is important to them during the rest of class (autonomy, relatedness). One method of assisting students in practicing both presentational skills and technical language use is process presentations, in which students present how to create a product or do an activity they find interesting and engage in in their free time. This is a particularly engaging task for students because they are motivated by their personal, compelling interests (relatedness), their choice of topic (autonomy), and the fact that their peers will actively participate in their activity (competence, relatedness). The task also encourages diverse students to engage their classmates in the creation of a cultural product that is special to them (e.g., baking a pie, making tamales, learning a dance, building a craft), which allows the task to move beyond a simple presentation (relatedness).

**Conclusion**

It is clear through the investigation of motivation theory that the development of student autonomy, competence, and relatedness can lead to increased intrinsic motivation, achievement, and well-being. In the context of second language
education, intrinsic motivation has been shown to be correlated with language achievement and student effort (Noels, Clément, & Pelletier, 1999; Noels, Pelletier, Clément, & Vallerand, 2000; Pae, 2008). When language teachers arrange their teaching to target intrinsic motivation, they are adjusting it to incorporate more TL communication, student expression, authentic language experiences, and diverse perceptions and beliefs. In following and modifying the strategies and examples described in this article, teachers will integrate opportunities for student choice and expression, constructive teacher feedback, meaningful communication, and the implementation of culturally relevant pedagogy, resulting in enhanced student engagement and positive language outcomes. Proficiency-based foreign language classrooms that value students’ diverse identities, choices, and forms of expression tend to be flexible, student-centered, and rich with TL use as recommended by ACTFL (2010).

Teachers who modify their instruction and plan to promote intrinsic motivation will encourage students to reconceptualize the purpose of language as a tool for empowerment. The three psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness share many commonalities with the outcomes of student empowerment (e.g., choice, voice, participation, creation of meaning), suggesting that autonomy-, competence-, and relatedness-supportive teachers who foster student intrinsic motivation will also promote student empowerment. Empowered bilinguals who are intrinsically motivated by language will not only feel capable to fill their own individual needs and build relationships, but act as advocates for language through their voices and actions. Because students internalize the values of people who care for them, teachers who make expression and care the core elements of their classroom will be cultivating the empowerment of language learners who use the language for those same purposes: to express and to care. Educators should recognize that all students have this potential because all students are innately curious. They enter school with a “strong propensity to learn” (Ryan & Deci, 2013, p. 193), and they learn best when they explore, play, follow their curiosities, and are motivated from within.

References

Empowerment and Intrinsic Motivation


