

# Motivating Through Autonomy: Theoretical Framework Illustrated

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**Abstract:** Students come to universities not as *tabulae rasae* but as mature learners with a past. They are expected to have experience and metacognitive skills that help them take control of their learning and reflect on the learning process. When their autonomy is encouraged, they can develop into independent learners who will not learn for school but for life. This is also evident in their motivation, which this paper aims to look at.

Our course English Autonomously (EA) has shown in the last three semesters significant progress in language competence, metacognition, learning strategies and also in motivation. This paper introduces some theoretical constructs of motivation with a focus on autonomy within and illustrate them with authentic examples provided by the students.

**Key words:** autonomy, intrinsic and extrinsic motivation

**Abstrakt:** V rámci kurzu Angličtina autonomně (English Autonomously) studenti během sebereflexe poměrně často hovoří o zkušenostech a o motivaci. Právě toto téma se příspěvek snaží uvést do teoretického rámce a zároveň jednotlivé koncepce ilustrovat autentickými příklady studentských postřehů o motivaci. Ty byly sesbírány v průběhu 3 semestrů kurzu, kdy studenti nejvíce hodnotí svůj vývoj v jazykových dovednostech, metakognici a strategiích pro učení se cizímu jazyku. Autorka se snaží objasnit vztah mezi motivací a autonomií v jazykovém vzdělávání na pozadí teoretických konceptů, které jsou blízké autonomii a motivaci.

## Background

Motivation has been of a major concern among teachers and scholars for centuries. Therefore the term itself, the word or the concept of motivation is something all of us understand. Its translation into many languages resembles the English term – French *motiver* or German *motivieren* are just like the English *motivate* and they all have the same meaning. Searching for an academic definition the interpretations are practically unanimous:

- “...the driving force which gives purpose or direction to human and animal behaviours (operating at a conscious and subconscious level)...” (URL: [psychologydictionary.org](http://psychologydictionary.org))
- “...the person’s willingness to exert physical or mental effort in order to complete a goal or set aim...” (URL: [psychologydictionary.org](http://psychologydictionary.org))
- “...the state or condition of being motivated or having a strong reason to act or accomplish something...” (URL: <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/motivation>)

Despite the fact that we all understand and experience motivation in many forms, it is difficult, if not impossible, to study and uncover as it is of intangible and immeasurable character. Psychology has been trying to capture, reveal and understand the secret of motivation, nevertheless, only some scholars have succeeded.

Autonomy, on the other hand, was for a long time a political and philosophical term. The concept of autonomy or self-direction in one's learning is present in Rousseau's work. However it only received more attention from the educational theorists in the 20th century; Dewey, Rogers, Illich and Vygotsky are only some of them (Benson, 2011). The role and impact of autonomy in learning can be seen in most of the educational theories and learning theories, e.g. behaviourism, cognitivism, socio-cognitivism, humanism, constructivism and positive psychology (Bertrand, 1998, Jarvis, 2010, Benson & Voller, 1997).

## Methods

This paper aims to present several theoretical constructs of motivation and the role of autonomy within it. To prove and illustrate the different taxonomies of motivation in the language learning environment, some evidence of the different forms of motivation are taken from the counselling sessions and written reflections of the students in the course English Autonomously (EA), which are used throughout the text. The students' perceptions have been collected over the past three terms, wherein 81 students finished the course out of 100 who attended.

The students in the course wrote their language learning history in the beginning of the term, had three individual counselling sessions, wrote a learning log and wrote a final reflection. Evaluation forms were also one of the sources of data. All these materials provide plenty of self-reflective data of both qualitative and quantitative character. Nevertheless, only several comments and quotations from different students have been selected for the purpose of this paper to illustrate some of the theoretical terms and concepts. They demonstrate the students' insight into motivation, determination and language learning. The intention is to prove the theories that are introduced here.

## Theory

One of the psychologists who devoted their work to motivation was Abraham Maslow. His hierarchy of needs (see Fig. 1) is known and taught and is essential for many scholars in the field. It is also the keystone for some of the theories discussed in this paper.

In his theory, Maslow claims that in order to concentrate on a higher level of needs we have to satiate the levels below. The basic needs, therefore, create a foundation for higher needs, which Maslow illustrated in a pyramid shaped

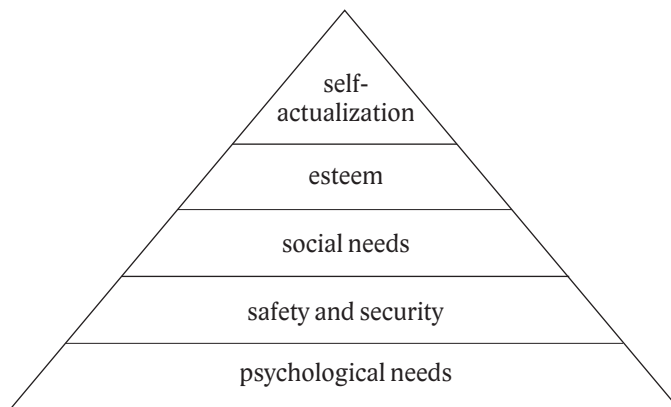


Fig. 1: Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (Adapted from <http://www.researchhistory.org/2012/06/16/maslows-hierarchy-of-needs>)

diagram. Physiological needs are represented by air, water, food, etc. Safety and security equal shelter and other requirements of a material nature. Social needs stand for relationships with other people – one's family, friends, social group, love, etc. Esteem reflects achievements and confidence. Finally, self-actualization shows spontaneity, realization and creativity that come from within an individual.

In learning and teaching situations, in school environments we expect the lowest levels to be satiated and taken for granted to a certain extent, even though we have to open windows to get some oxygen into our students' brains from time to time and we want to offer them the feeling of security too. The upper three levels of Maslow's hierarchy of needs are the basis for a significant direction in psychology – the Self-Determination Theory (SDT). It was introduced in the 1970s, but its main focus then was not education. The will to get well after an illness and the determination to run a marathon were some of the issues and applications of the SDT and the studies focused on the intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. Deci and Ryan, the founders of SDT work with psychological needs that resemble the three upper needs from Maslow's pyramid. However, they have given them different labels: autonomy, competence and relatedness (or belonging). They believe that these needs are the building blocks for the desire to grow and for well-being (i.e. for self-motivation) (Deci and Ryan, 2002).

They understand the *competence* as a sense of confidence that drives people into challenging activities that are appropriate to their skills and capacities. Their term *relatedness* refers to caring and feeling connected to others. It is the need to be accepted by others, belonging to others. The third need, *autonomy*, represents the capacity or urge to be the agent in one's own life and lead towards harmony and

integrity. This basic needs theory can be seen as a sub-theory within the SDT. The authors are aware of the fact that not all motives function towards well-being and some might distract or side-track the individuals from their goals, because the personal motives and desires are often beyond their categorization (Deci, Ryan, 2002, pp. 6–8), nevertheless, that is beyond the concern of this paper.

For Deci and Ryan (Deci, Ryan, 2002, pp. 13–14), the need for competence, autonomy and relatedness play an important role in intrinsic motivation. However, the latter is probably not as strong as the former two, which they illustrate on some activities that people can do alone, in solitude but still be intrinsically motivated. When we apply their theory on language learning though, relatedness is immensely important. Interaction with others is an inseparable part of communication and therefore language learning. Thus in ELT, the need for relatedness is as relevant as the need for autonomy or competence, if not more so.

The SDT and its basic needs theory in some aspects resembles Pink's factors, which lead to better performance and personal satisfaction: mastery, purpose and autonomy (Pink, 2009). Even though his perspective is more business-oriented, it can be applied to second language acquisition too. He sees autonomy as the human desire to direct oneself, one's life and to be engaged in what is going on. Mastery, or challenge, is the urge to get better at something that matters, to make a contribution. Purpose can be seen as one's ambition to do something larger than oneself. These three factors also influence the performance of any language learner. These three elements empower the motivation on a level that is very different from the system of external rewards (e.g. good results in the exam). It is these three elements that determine intrinsic motivation that comes from within. When learning itself is considered to be the reward, people tend to do their best for themselves and learning is deeper.

The three factors interact, which in language learning can be illustrated by what one of the EA students said: "Reported speech was really challenging for me. I had difficulties in the beginning because the rules in the textbook were strange. But then I saw the goal, I really had a reason to try and use the reported speech because I heard it in a film. And I realized that I want to use it too. I didn't want to make mistakes. So I started using it and it started to make sense. And I wanted to use it more and now it is natural and I'm proud of myself." This student describes how she learnt a certain grammar concept and how she applied it in her speaking. She was missing the purpose in the textbook but then found it in an authentic situation and began to use it on her own, without anybody telling her. She also describes how the challenge changed into something she was proud of (i.e. mastery).

Gardner focuses on language learning and defines the following three components of motivation (Gardner, 1985, p. 10)

- the effort to achieve the goal (how much?)
- the desire to achieve the goal (how strong?)
- the attitudes toward learning (how positive?)

Apart from these, he also introduces a theoretical motivational construct that distinguishes between the instrumental and integrative orientation of one's learning that begins to question the reason or purpose of why people learn a language. The former covers the pragmatic goals, such as getting a job; the latter is related to interaction with other speakers of the language and communication, therefore, is social and emotional. There is an obvious difference between these two students:

M. at a counselling session: *"I've had two semesters of Medical English but I need more. And not only medical terminology. I want to apply for an internship in a hospital in Great Britain, so I really have to be good at English. It's a must, if I want to work abroad. And I do."*

A. in his language learning history: *"My older brother had a friend in the US and I wanted to have friends in other countries too. And now, I want to apply for Erasmus and I want to improve my English before I go. I want to speak to other people and to my teachers, write essays in English and to be involved / be part of the class."*

Both of these students are motivated at a rather general level – they mention the long term goal. They both have the desire to achieve their goals and willing to put effort into their learning, even though the extent is unknown; however the attitude is unidentified. Both, instrumental and integrative motivation show a certain degree of external agent in themselves, as will be explained below.

Ushioda is very clear in her explanation of why intrinsic motivation in learning is so important: "... we need to encourage in students the awareness that learning is motivating in itself, rather than merely the vague belief that their learning today will somehow be instrumental to unspecified educational or vocational goals tomorrow..." (Ushioda, p. 19). Intrinsic learning motivation is connected with such positive feelings of enjoyment, pleasure and satisfaction. Among other areas, such as personal control, autonomy, skills and mastery, intrinsic learning motivation also generates its own rewards, which means that it is self-sustaining (Ushioda, p. 51).

The term intrinsic motivation unsurprisingly resonates with all the scholars. Sometimes, only intrinsic motivation is considered to be the true motivation, which might be even stronger in the context of autonomous learning. We may be misled into believing that extrinsic motivation is not autonomous. Organismic Integration Theory (Deci, Ryan, 2002), which is another SDT sub-theory, shows that even extrinsic motivation can be autonomously accepted by an individual. The extent to which the autonomy interacts is shown in a self-determination

continuum, which Ryan and Deci constructed (see Fig. 2.). It illustrates the four forms of extrinsic motivation that lie between intrinsic motivation on one end and amotivation on the other end of the continuum. The extrinsic motivation in this theory is classified according to the degree of autonomy that is present in the motivation (Deci, Ryan, 2002, pp. 16–22).

	<i>Non self-determined</i>				<i>Self-determined</i>	
	Amotivation	Extrinsic Motivation			Intrinsic Motivation	
Regulatory style:	<b>Non-Regulation</b>	<b>External Regulation</b>	<b>Introjected Regulation</b>	<b>Identified Regulation</b>	<b>Integrated Regulation</b>	<b>Intrinsic Regulation</b>
Source of motivation:	Impersonal	External	Somewhat External	Somewhat Internal	Internal	Internal
Motivation regulators:	No intention Incompetence Lack of control	Compliance External rewards or punishments	Ego-involvement Approval from others	Valuing an activity Endorsement of goals	Congruence Synthesis with self	Interest Enjoyment Inherent satisfaction

Fig. 2: *The Self-Determination Continuum (adapted from Deci, Ryan, 2002, p. 16)*

- amotivation – L. in an email: “I need to cancel my enrolment because I don’t have the course in my Learning Agreement and I don’t need the credits. I want to focus on other things than learning English.”
  - after 5 weeks in the course, this student realized that learning English was not what she wanted to do – lack of motivation, no intention
- external regulation – D. in his final reflection “I took the course because I thought it could be a good way how to get 2 credits.”
  - this pragmatic student seems to be interested in the reward, i.e. the credits, more than the learning itself; however, it has to be noted here that his attitude changed during the term and he later commented on the change in his motivation and declared that he “...enjoyed learning this way.”
- introjected regulation – V. at the counselling “My boyfriend speaks English, like, really well. We want travel in summer, so I want show him that I can also be like good.”
  - approval from her boyfriend is a strong motivation for this student
- identified regulation – P. at the counselling: “I plan to write my thesis in English and I need somebody to help me with that, that’s why I’d like to take the module on academic writing.”
  - the goal, represented here by the thesis, determines the motivation and is personally important

- integrated regulation – E. in her language learning history: “I’ve chosen presentation skills because I need to give presentations because I want to be good at presenting.”
- intrinsic regulation – M. at the counselling: “Learning English is my favourite way of procrastination. It’s so much more fun than learning other things! Making mind-maps and wordlists is like my new addiction now.”

This continuum demonstrates even more variety of motivation and there could be many more theories and constructs listed here. However, the researcher’s (i.e. theoretical) point of view is only one side of the coin; the other side shows the practical perspective of a teacher or the learners themselves. Furthermore, the examples so far illustrate the motivation for learning the language in general, i.e. why people learn the language or why they want to focus on a certain skill. Nevertheless, it is important to realize that in spite of this long-term goal in motivation the learners have to overcome lots of ups and downs on an everyday basis. This large and often distant goal, therefore, has to be broken up into smaller short-term goals that will lead the learner step by step towards their aim. This will enable them to see the progress which maintains the motivational thinking.

Ushioda suggests developing effective motivational thinking in order to achieve self-motivation. She is very explicit when she states that “...autonomous language learners are by definition motivated learners...” (Ushioda,1996, p. 2). Autonomy therefore could be the key to self-motivation and the desired intrinsic motivation. More specifically, she speaks about:

- personal control of one’s motivation (engaged in learning)
- positive self-concept, believing in oneself as a learner / user of the foreign language (self-reflection)
- successful experience (external feedback)
- minimizing the negatives (classroom climate...)
- motivational autonomy (no blaming the school, teacher...)

Some of these are independent and autonomous; however, others relate to external agents and variables. In any learning environment, we cannot avoid the impact of the family members, peers in and out of class, members of the L2 community or teachers. These are human variables that together with other agents, such as learning and teaching materials, influence motivation in language learning.

Noels conducted research in language learning that concentrates on the impact that the teacher’s communication style has on the learners (Noels, 2001) and her findings support what Deci and Ryan introduced (Deci and Ryan, 1985). They claim that if the teacher’s communication style is controlling, mediated by threats, deadlines and rewards, the intrinsic motivation is undermined. On the other hand,

the autonomy-supportive styles tend to encourage the learner's intrinsic motivation. The feedback from the teachers should therefore be compassionate, positive and informational rather than critical and negative. This undermining or supporting of learners' intrinsic motivation might correlate with extrinsic motivation, however this requires more research in the field.

Ushioda's motivational thinking as well as Deci and Ryan's autonomy supportive teaching style reflect Dornyei's motivational teaching practice – Fig. 3 (Dornyei, 2001).

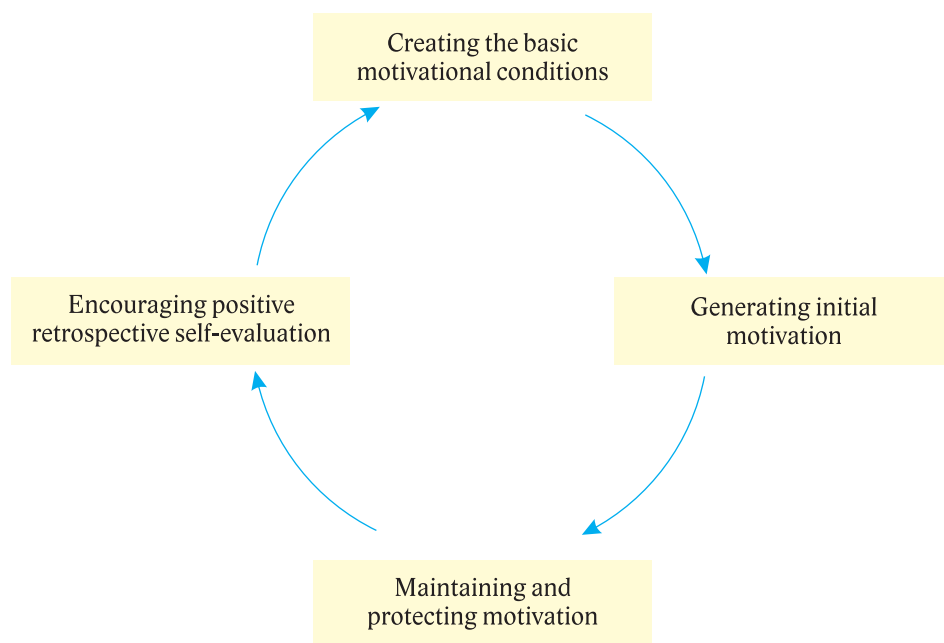


Fig. 3: *Motivational Teaching Practice* (adapted from Dornyei, 2001, p. 29)

This diagram only outlines the model of components that are present in L2 classrooms. Its detailed version is an inspiration for anybody who aims for autonomy support in language classes. Dornyei's studies go into more detail where he also introduces more constructs. This one, however, completes the motivational thinking that Ushioda speaks about.

## Conclusion

The students of the EA course, where the teaching is autonomy supportive, where the teachers are merely facilitators of the learning process and the students have to accept the responsibility for their learning, report progress in many areas: they



cover their language skills which are dependent on the choice of the modules but also change in the field of metacognition and in their personal growth. The change in motivation and in attitudes towards learning and L2 learning is often mentioned in their evaluation forms, final counselling sessions and written reflections. This progress is going to be analysed in more detail and on a larger sample in further research.

The key question now seems to be whether or not the teachers can motivate their students and pupils. Deci's famous TED talk concludes with a clear message about motivating other people: "We should not ask how to motivate other people; we have to think about it in a different way and ask how to create the conditions within which others will motivate themselves" (Deci, 2012). This is a paraphrase of Einstein's quote "I never teach my pupils, I only attempt to provide the conditions in which they can learn." What is described in these quotes is a teacher's role in the motivation process which Ushioda refers to as motivational thinking (see above) – autonomy supporting.

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