

## Self-determination Theory as a Grand Theory of Motivation in EFL Classroom

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### Abstract

Self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985a) is on this tenet that autonomy-supportive teaching style promotes autonomous/intrinsic motivational regulations among the learners through supporting the basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness. This study first presents an overview of self-determination theory (SDT) and its five mini-theories as well as their application to the study of second language acquisition. Then, this study indicates how autonomy-supportive teaching style within self-determination theory paradigm nurtures autonomous/intrinsic motivation, basic psychological needs, personal interests, and integrated values among EFL learners. This study provides evidence on the fact that when teachers become more aware of the consequences of their communicative styles and behaviors in the classroom; they gain a greater capacity to behave in an autonomous way, rather than in an impulsive and reactive way. Moreover, this study indicates how teachers' awareness toward their behaviors during the instruction is their first step in becoming more autonomy-supportive teachers. Collectively, this study concludes with implications for language teachers in EFL classroom.

**Keywords:** autonomy; competence; relatedness; motivation; self-determination theory

### INTRODUCTION

Socialization is the process through which every individual learns and internalizes the social percepts which in fact allows him to function effectively in the society (Maccoby, 1984). The socialization perspective of self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985b) emphasizes an inherent orientation toward personal growth and integration of self. According to Deci and Ryan (2000), self-determination theory is on this supposition that humans are intrinsically active organisms who have great orientations toward enhancing their capabilities by having interaction with the social environment, seeking opportunities for choice and having integration with their ongoing experiences. Self-determination theory as an organismic-dialectic framework of motivation is on this tenet that humans are always actively searching for optimal challenges and new experience in the life (Deci & Ryan, 1991; Deci, Ryan & Williams, 1996). In other words, self-determination theory assumes that humans are active organisms who are oriented

toward developing their capabilities by interacting with the social environment. In education, self-determination theory suggests that the learners are intrinsically motivated to deal with activities that are interesting, optimally challenging and satisfying. Therefore, this review provided evidence on the application of self-determination theory and its mini-theories to developing autonomous motivation among EFL learners.

## **SELF-DETERMINATION THEORY**

As a macrotheory of human motivation, Deci and Ryan's (2000) self-determination theory (SDT) addresses such basic issues as personality development, self-regulation, basic psychological needs, learning goals, energy and vitality, and the impact of learning environments on learners' motivation, affect, behavior, and wellbeing. Self-determination theory suggests that autonomy-supportive contexts maintain or enhance intrinsic motivation and promote identification with external regulations, while controlling contexts tend to undermine intrinsic motivation. In educational settings, the concept of autonomy support means that the teacher takes the learners' perspective, acknowledges their feelings, and provides them with information and opportunities for choice, while reducing the use of pressures and demands. Deci and Ryan's (2000) self-determination theory suggests that autonomy-supportive contexts maintain or enhance intrinsic motivation and promote identification with external regulations, while controlling contexts tend to undermine intrinsic motivation. In educational settings, the concept of autonomy support means that the teacher takes the learners' perspective, acknowledges their feelings, and provides them with information and opportunities for choice, while reducing the use of pressures and demands (Deci, Mezelek, & Sheinman, 1981). Many studies have indicated that autonomy-supportive learning environment is associated with better learning, more creativity, and greater intrinsic motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Rahmanpanah, 2017; Rahmanpanah & Tajeddin, 2015; Ryan & Connell, 1989; Ryan, & Deci, 2002, 2008; Ryan & Neimiec, 2009). Moreover, under the tenets of self-determination theory, the five mini-theories of basic needs theory, organismic integration theory, goal contents theory, cognitive evaluation theory, and causality orientation theory are identified.

## **BASIC NEEDS THEORY**

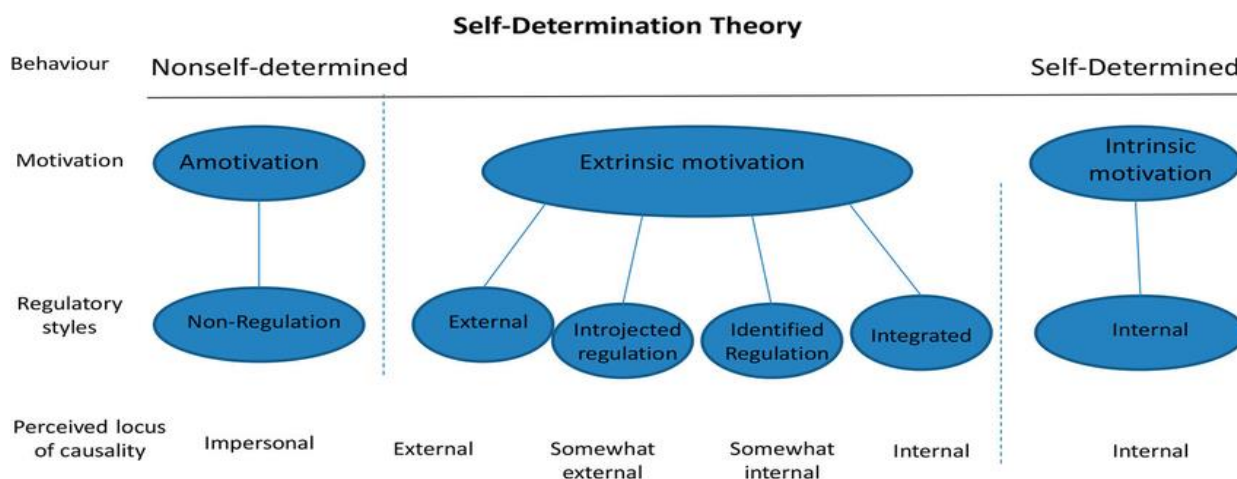
In experimental psychology, Deci and Ryan (2002) believe that there exist a set of innate psychological needs that push the organism into action and must be satisfied for the organism to remain healthy. Psychological needs are defined as individual differences in preferences and desires that are learned over time (Deci & Ryan, 1985b). As Deci and Ryan (2008) point out, needs are defined as innate psychological nutriment that are vital for enhancing psychological growth and well-being. Ryan and Deci (2002) suggest that the satisfaction of basic psychological needs contributes to psychological well-being, effective performance, and physical health while neglecting these needs will cause negative consequences. Therefore, human needs characterize the necessary conditions for psychological health or well-being and the satisfaction of these needs is assumed to be associated with the greatest functioning. One benefit of

describing human needs is that it provides us with opportunity to predict which variables in the social context will have positive or negative effects on self-regulation (Ryan, 1995; Ryan & Solky, 1996; Ryan, Nix, & Hamm, 2004). Basic needs theory identifies the three psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness as the source of learners' inherent and intrinsic motivational tendency to pursue novelty, seek optimal challenge and extend their capacities to learn. Autonomy is the psychological need to experience behavior as deriving from the self. That is to say, autonomy refers to learners' experience of behaving in accordance with their own interests and values (Reeve, 2006). In EFL contexts, learners experience autonomy needs satisfaction to the extent to which their learning environment takes their internal locus of causality into consideration, provides a sense of psychological freedom, and great options and choice in the learning process. Competence is learners' tendency toward mastery and effectiveness in relation with environment. Competence is not an acquired skill but it is rather a sense of confidence and effectance in action (Deci, 1975). As Deci points out, learners' develop their sense of competence in learning environment that provide optimal challenges and affirmative feedback. Relatedness refers to the psychological need to establish emotional attachments with others (Markland & Tobin, 2004; Reeve, Deci, & Ryan, 2004; Ryan & Solky, 1996). In EFL classroom, it indicates to be emotionally connected and interpersonally involved in affectionately warm and caring relationships. Relatedness refers to learners' tendency to be accepted by others. Relatedness is not concerned with attainment of any certain outcome but instead it is concerned with a sense of being with others in a safe relationship (Reeve, 1998; Reeve & Jang, 2006). Basic needs theory identifies the three psychological nutrients that learners' need to be psychologically, physically, and socially well. Basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness describe why learners sometimes indicate motivation and autonomy in one learning environment but show a passive and amotivated regulation in other setting (Deci, 2000).

Therefore, the manner in which teachers interact with the learners is linked with the learners' motivation. When the learners make decisions about their own learning and receive clear feedback about their progress, they would have high self-perceptions of autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Deci and Ryan (2002) state that the principles of self-determination are useful for describing the learners' motivation and there is a relation between teacher autonomy-supportive style and the learners' intrinsic motivation. Moreover language learners lose their intrinsic motivation when their language teachers do not provide them any constructive information about their learning progress. Therefore, many studies (Deci, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2008; Ryan, Connell, & Plant, 1990; Ryan, Koestner, & Deci, 1991) suggest that autonomy-supportive learning environment leads to greater internalization of values and more intrinsic motivation as the teacher takes the learners' perspective, encourages self-initiation, provides choice, and minimizes the use of controlling language.

## ORGANISMIC INTEGRATION THEORY

Organismic integration theory (OIT) indicates how learners engage in behaviors that are interesting and enjoyable (Deci & Ryan, 2000). In other words, OIT indicates how learners are organismically subject to internalize and integrate values and practices. Thus, this theory identifies those behavioral regulations that are not familiar to the self (Reeve, 2011). OIT specifies a continuum of autonomy underlying extrinsic motivational regulations. According to organismic integration theory, extrinsic motivations can be classified into external, introjected, identified, and integrated regulations.



**Figure 1.** Motivation Types within Self-determination Theory

The least type of extrinsic motivation is external regulation. Those behaviors that are performed by learners to satisfy an external demand or obtain an externally imposed reward are labeled externally regulated behaviors (Deci & Ryan, 2000). In other words, external regulation refers to those behaviors that are determined through means external to the individual such as tangible rewards or punishment. With respect to L2 learning, the learner who works hard to learn an L2 exclusively for the purpose of acquiring a course credit or gaining a teacher's praise is considered as an externally regulated one. In other words, the learners who are externally regulated are learning the L2 because of the existence of contingency in the environment such as gaining a reward. Introjected regulation is the second type of extrinsic motivation. Introjection describes a type of internal regulation that is still controlling. The people perform many actions with the feeling of pressure in order to avoid anxiety (Deci & Ryan, 2002). Hence, introjected regulation is more internalized but it is still extrinsic since the learners are not performing the task for its inherent enjoyment (Deci & Ryan, 2008). Regarding L2 learning, we can refer to a learner who does his L2 homework because he would feel guilty if it were not completed or a learner who makes an attempt to learn his assignment to impress the others with his language proficiency. Moreover, those learners who learn L2 to avoid the feelings of embarrassment or to gain respect from the others possess introjected regulation (Deci, 2000; Reeve, 2006). A more autonomous form of extrinsic motivation is regulation through identification. The activity is incorporated into the self-concept, and the individual does the activity as it is consistent with what he values (Deci & Ryan, 1995; Ryan & Deci, 2002). A case in point,

an EFL learner who feels that being culturally sensitive is important possesses positive views about language learning since he believes it helps him to support this valued goal.

### **GOAL CONTENTS THEORY**

Goal content theory was developed to understand how the content of a goal can lead to differential outcomes affecting well-being and behavior (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Intrinsic goal contents such as personal growth lead learners to satisfy psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2000). In contrast, extrinsic goal contents are normally pursued for external contingencies such as self-worth, and do not lead to psychological need satisfaction. Goal contents theory deals with the reasons of learners' effort in their academic career. Goals contents theory derives from the distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic goals such as personal growth and interpersonal relationships satisfy basic psychological needs and well-being, while having motivation in pursuit of extrinsic goals such as enhancing the job status, achieving higher scores, or even gaining the respect from peers or teachers ignore basic needs satisfaction, leading to ill-being, depression, anxiety, and lack of permanent success (Ryan, Deci, 2008; Ryan, Connell, Plant, 1990). Under the tenets of goal contents theory, EFL learners do not achieve psychological well-being by attaining their valued goals. That is to say, EFL learners develop deeper learning, better academic achievement, greater psychological well-being by pursuing and attaining intrinsic goals and values since intrinsic goals invigorate their inner motivational resources (Reeve, 2006, 2009). However, when EFL learners focus on extrinsic goals, they normally have propensity towards contingency approval and external reward.

### **COGNITIVE EVALUATION THEORY**

Cognitive evaluation theory (CET) specifies factors that explain variability in intrinsic motivation. CET is framed in terms of social and environmental factors that facilitate versus undermine intrinsic motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Within the framework of cognitive evaluation theory, rewards undermine intrinsic motivation. When the learner is given a reward for something, the reward might have harmful effects on his subsequent motivation when the extrinsic reward has received (Ryan & Deci, 2000). CET is on this tenet that learning environment develops the sense of competence among learners which, in turn, has a positive effect on intrinsic motivation. Moreover, CET posits that when learners engage in activities for internal locus of causality, there will be a positive effect on their intrinsic motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2008).

As Deci (2000) points out, cognitive evaluation theory explains how and why external rewards or praise influence intrinsic motivation. Intrinsically motivated behaviors are the ones that are supported by the satisfactions learners experience while being engaged in a learning activity. Therefore, according to cognitive evaluation theory, external reward such as tests, rewards, grades, deadlines, feedback have the two poles apart functions of controlling and informative aspects (Reeve, 2012). External rewards have controlling aspect when they pressure the learners for behaving in a specific way (Deci & Ryan, 1995; Reeve, 2012). In EFL classroom, learners experience a reward as a

controlling aspect when the teacher offers the reward in exchange for having obedient behavior such as attending the class on time. Controlling external rewards undermine intrinsic motivation while non-controlling external events maintain intrinsic motivation. Reversely, informational aspect of an external reward takes competence into consideration. That is to say, informational event improves functioning. To illustrate, language teacher might grant a privilege to the learner for being punctual. Therefore, cognitive evaluation centers on the distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation (Deci & Ryan, 1985a). In EFL classroom, when learners experience intrinsic motivation, they engage in activities they perceive as interesting, gratifying, enjoyable, pleasing, and fascinating. Nevertheless, when learners experience extrinsic motivation, they engage in activities owing to tangible consequences they are attracted such as better score or higher praise from their peers or teachers (Deci, Ryan, & Williams, 1996). In a nutshell, the followings are the basic tenets of cognitive evaluation theory:

- Intrinsically motivated activities are autonomous.
- Factors that facilitate an internal locus of causality facilitate intrinsic motivation.
- External events such as rewards, praise, or criticism are perceived to be informational, controlling, or even amotivated.
- External rewards that are viewed by the actor as informational enhance intrinsic motivation, while those events that are perceived to be controlling will undermine intrinsic motivation through affecting self-determination.

## CAUSALITY ORIENTATIONS THEORY

Deci and Ryan (1991) state that motivated actions are self-determined as they are engaged by one's sense of self while controlled actions are compelled by some interpersonal force. When a behavior is self-determined, the regulatory process is choice and volition but when it is controlled, the regulatory process is obedience. Elsewhere, Deci and Ryan (1985b) state that this aspect that ranges from being self-determined to being controlled derives from the concept of perceived locus of causality. Causality orientations describe the learners' orientation towards the motivational forces that cause the behavior (Deci & Ryan, 1985b). To initiate classroom activities, some EFL learners might have propensity towards their self-determination or autonomous aspects such as interests, personal goals, and self-recognized values. However, other EFL learners might rely on controlling aspects such as environmental incentives and social prescriptions to initiate the learning process. Hence, when EFL learners rely on self-determined sources of motivation to guide their learning activities, they hold an autonomy causality orientation but when they rely on controlled sources of motivation to regulate their learning process, they embrace a controlled causality orientation. Deci and Ryan distinguish among autonomy, control, and impersonal causality orientations. Autonomy orientation involves a high degree of experienced choice in terms of the initiation and regulation of one's own behavior. Autonomy orientation is positively related to self-actualization and integration in personality.

When autonomy oriented, learners seek opportunities for self-determination and choice and they normally have internal perceived locus of causality. Locus of causality refers to the perceived source of regulation of behavior. Locus of causality explains learners' behavior during the learning process (Deci & Ryan, 1985b). The control orientation is associated with public-consciousness, defensive functioning, and considering extrinsic motivators. The control oriented learners are normally regulated by the learning environment they are dealing with. To exemplify, EFL learners who have control orientation are normally affected by deadlines, threats, or even their teachers' expectations. Impersonal orientation is linked to the belief that learners cannot control their behaviors and their outcomes. That is to say, learners are not able to regulate their behavior in a way that will lead to desired outcomes. Hence, impersonal orientation is usually associated with depression and self-derogation (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Reeve, 2012). In EFL classroom, impersonal oriented learners possess the sense of incompetence as they believe learning process is too difficult to be initiated and regulated by their personal intentions.

## **INTRINSIC MOTIVATION**

According to Deci and Ryan (2000), the intrinsic and extrinsic motivation lies on a continuum of self-determination from amotivation through external, introjected, identified, and integrated regulations, to intrinsic motivation. With respect to L2 learning, several studies indicate that intrinsic motivation is associated with lower anxiety, more positive attitudes towards language learning and higher feelings of self-efficacy in language learning (Noels, 2001, 2005; Noels, Pelletier, & Clement, 1999). The concept of intrinsic motivation gained its interest as behaviors that occurred independent of any reinforcement contingencies. In other words, intrinsic motivation refers to motivation to perform an activity for satisfaction that accompanies the action. Intrinsically motivated behaviors are autotelic as they are performed out of interest and they do not have any requirement for reward (Reeve, 2009; Ryan, Koestner, & Deci, 1991). Deci and Ryan (1995) state that intrinsically motivated behaviors occur in the absence of external reward. This in fact implies that intrinsic motivation is a challenge against the tenet of operant psychology which is founded on this concept that all behaviors have external reinforcement. According to Deci and Ryan, intrinsic motivation is the prototype of self-determination as it possesses full sense of choice minus the feeling of coercion or compulsion. Therefore, an EFL learner who is intrinsically motivated is doing an activity that interests him. To reformulate, intrinsic motivation refers to the reasons for second language learning that are derived from one's inherent pleasure and interest in the activity.

## **AUTONOMY SUPPORTIVE TEACHING STYLE WITHIN SELF-DETERMINATION THEORY**

According to Ryan and Deci (2000), the quality of the persons social-environmental conditions that functions as a key condition to explain when people are engaged actively and when they are passively disengaged. Deci and Ryan's (1985a) self-determination theory posits that the people's inherent motivational sources are supported and

nurtured by other people. In educational settings, the concept of motivating style deals with the teacher's interpersonal style toward the learners and it exists on a continuum, ranging from a highly controlling style to a highly autonomy-supportive style. Within the framework of self-determination theory, motivational style is affected by the factors in the social environment that affect self-perceptions of competence and autonomy. In educational settings, the teacher appears to be the key person who affects these perceptions. Therefore, the teachers' communicative styles are associated with the learners' autonomous motivation (Reeve, 2006, Rahmanpanah, 2017). Elsewhere, Reeve (2012) states that when teacher-learners interactions go well, teachers function both as a guide to structure learners' learning opportunities, as well as support system to nurture learners' interests and to enable learners to internalize new values, develop important skills, and develop social responsibility. In this supportive condition, learners' classroom activity is consistent with their needs, interests and preferences as learners show strong motivation, active engagement and meaningful learning (Deci, Ryan, & Williams, 1991& Reeve, 2006; Reeve & Jang, 2006; Reeve, Deci, & Ryan). As Deci (2000) points out, autonomy-supportive teachers facilitate congruence by identifying and nurturing the learners' needs, interests, and preferences, and by creating classroom opportunities for learners to guide their behavior. Nevertheless, controlling teachers interfere with learners' self-determination because they as learners are to adapt themselves to the teacher-constructed instructional regulations. In other words, autonomy-supportive learning environments involve and nurture the learners' psychological needs, personal interests, and integrated values. Autonomy-supportive learning environment is the one that the teacher acknowledges the learners' perspective, allow opportunities and choice for self-initiation, apply non-controlling language, and provide timely positive feedback (Reeve & Jang, 2006; Reeve, Bolt, & Cai, 1999). Moreover, some added concepts were introduced into the definitions of autonomy-support, including offering choices (Williams, Cox, Kouides, & Deci, 1999), nurturing inner motivational resources (Reeve, Deci, & Ryan, & 2004), and acknowledging perspective and feelings (Edmunds, Ntoumanis, & Duda, 2008).

Correspondingly, EFL Learners in classroom taught by teachers having autonomy-supportive communicative style experience an impressive and meaningful range of positive educational outcomes, including greater perceived competence, higher motivation, greater engagement, positive emotionality, higher autonomous motivation, and enhanced well-being. However, what language teacher can do in trying to have autonomy-supportive communicative style is to become less controlling. In other words, to foster autonomy-supportive teaching style, the teachers are to avoid controlling sentiment, controlling language, and controlling behaviors. As teachers become more mindful of the causes and consequences of their motivating style, they gain a greater capacity to behave in a flexible, autonomous, and adaptive way, rather than in an impulsive, habitual, or reactive way. As Reeve (2006) points out, the four teacher characteristics of attunement, relatedness, supportiveness, and gentle discipline foster autonomy-supportive teaching style within SDT. Attunement or sensitivity (Kochanska) occurs when the teacher feels learners' state of being and adjusts his instruction accordingly. When the teacher is attuned to his learners, he knows what



learners are thinking and feeling, and how involved they are during the learning process.

As Reeve points out, attuned teachers know what their learners want and need as they always negotiate with their learners in different aspects. Therefore, this sensitivity allows the teacher to be responsive to learners' words, needs, preferences, and emotions, leading to enhanced autonomous motivational regulations. Relatedness is a sense of being close to another person; it occurs when teachers create the conditions in which students feel special and important to the teacher; it revolves around a teacher provided sense of warmth, affection, and approval for students (Reeve, 2006, 2012; Ryan & Solky, 1996).

Supportiveness happens when the teacher accepts learners' capacities and encourages them to understand their goals. As Ryan and Deci (2002) argue, teachers' supportiveness and learners' academic success are in tandem because the more supportive the teacher is, the more competent the learners feel and the higher they feel they are in control of their learning. Furthermore, gentle discipline is opposite power assertion. Gentle discipline is a socialization strategy that explains why one way of behaving is right and another one is wrong. Contrary to power assertion that involves forceful commands and insistence from the teacher, gentle discipline involves teachers' acceptance of learners' expressions of negative feelings (Reeve, 2006). Undoubtedly, language teachers can apply a more autonomy-supportive teaching climate in EFL classroom through embedding the four characteristics of attunement, relatedness, supportiveness, and gentle discipline within their behaviors.

## CONCLUSION

This study supports the claim that an internalized orientation for language learning is associated with experiencing the needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness. EFL learners possess more internalized reasons for language learning when they have strong perceptions of autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Deci and Ryan's (2000) self-determination theory distinguishes between self-determined and controlled types of intentional regulation. When a behavior is self-determined, the regulatory process is choice and volition but when it is controlled, the regulatory process is obedience (Ryan, 1995; Ryan & Deci, 2002). Based on the paradigm of self-determination theory, EFL learners' perceived competence and intrinsic motivation can be enhanced provided that EFL teachers provide opportunities for autonomous learning. In a nutshell, the followings are the major conclusions drawn from this study:

- Autonomy-supportive environments nurture learners' psychological needs and integrated values in EFL contexts.
- Through supporting autonomy in the classroom, language teachers promote autonomous intrinsic motivation by understanding their learners' perspectives, creating opportunities for choice and encouraging the sense of self-determination.

- As described within self-determination theory, to the extent that language learners experience learning context that promote competence, autonomy and, relatedness, they are likely to become autonomously/intrinsically motivated.
- Because teachers' teaching styles can be flexible, it might be necessary to educate language teachers to understand the importance of satisfying learners' basic psychological needs and of course satisfying the learners' psychological needs can be done through providing opportunities for choice and input, empathizing with the learners' perspective.
- Autonomy-supportive language teachers create opportunities for EFL learners to work in their own way and encourage their efforts and persistence.

Hence, the more EFL teachers are involved in their learners' learning process by providing them with informative and uncritical feedback, the more EFL learners feel competent and autonomous is L2 learning. Although many more experimental studies are still required, this review highlights the applications of self-determination theory and its mini-theories to fostering autonomous motivation among language learners.

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