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Taking Root: Self-Determination in Language Education

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Anyone passing through the mountains of the Japanese countryside will soon notice a unique shade of green. This coloring comes in part from the bamboo that springs up in groves between the ubiquitous cedar forests. Bamboo slowly grows underground building a strong lattice of roots in all directions, allowing it to climb the steep hills and send its shoots skyward while also preventing erosion and landslides during the torrential downpours of the rainy season. Strong as steel but pliant, bamboo bends with the annual typhoon winds but always returns to its original strong and straight center. Growing within its ecosystem, it complements the natural world around it in sustainable fashion.

Self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2017) as it has come to maturity in language education is much like bamboo. SDT's flexibility has allowed it to be applied in multiple cultural settings, demonstrating its universal but not uniform nature (Soenens et al., 2014); the theory's

continued appeal come from its liberating message and its dedication to empirical rigor. The main propositions, such as the need for autonomy, the benefits of autonomy support, and the importance of intrinsic motivation, work across national boundaries and research domains to broaden communication and build a science of motivation (Ryan et al., 2021). With roots forming a foundation in other areas during the 1970s, 80s, and early 90s, representative research can now be found in sports (Ntoumanis & Standage, 2009), management (Gagne et al., 2019), music (Evans et al., 2012), business (Cerasoli et al., 2014), and education (Reeve & Cheon, 2021). SDT is now showing new shoots arising in our field, building from the language education papers that first brought it about (Noels et al., 1999; Noels et al., 2000), with innovative new work being produced year on year (Liu & Oga-Baldwin, 2022; Noels et al., 2019; Parrish, 2020). The current special issue illustrates exactly how SDT has taken root and is set to grow into a strong and sustainable ecosystem that complements and strengthens the larger psychology of the language learning field.

The collection of seven papers represented by this special issue of the *Journal for the Psychology of Language Learning* are firmly rooted in the traditions and philosophy of self-determination theory. These papers offer a variety of qualitative and quantitative perspectives, exploring new aspects of how SDT can inform the practice of teaching and learning languages in multiple cultural contexts.

THE SPECIAL ISSUE PAPERS

In looking at the papers of this special issue, the SDT mini-theories offer a natural delineation of the “species” of each paper. The mini-theories of Basic Psychological Needs, Cognitive Evaluation, and Organismic Integration are well represented in this issue, and we will discuss each of the papers in turn in terms of their contributions to the mini-theories.

Basic Psychological Needs Theory (BPNT), especially the need for autonomy, has long been one of the most controversial aspects of the theory (Ryan & Deci, 2017; Sugita-McEown & Oga-Baldwin, 2019). The propositions for a need for competence, relatedness, and autonomy in order to be optimally motivated and achieve well-being has seen no shortage of criticism (cf. Iyengar & Lepper, 1999; Oishi, 2000; Schwartz, 2000). Finding general acceptance for the mini-theory in the very different studies in this special issue by Alamer, Davis, and Mynard and Shelton-Strong is heartening for other theoretical propositions and mini-theories presented in SDT; if the needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness have been validated and accepted in Saudi Arabia, Japan, and the United States, there is strong likelihood that they can find acceptance in many other diverse cultures. Their applicability in both quantitative (Alamer) and qualitative (Davis) methods of analysis additionally shows their practical use. The theoretical applicability in new settings such as self-access centers (Mynard & Shelton-Strong) found in many foreign language programs around the world is a further sign that the basic needs can be nurtured in language education environments.

Cognitive Evaluation Theory (CET) is one of the original cornerstones of self-determination theory (Ryan, 1982), stemming from the original studies of contingent rewards on human behavior (Deci, 1972a, 1972b). It is measured implicitly in several of the papers (Mynard &

Shelton-Strong; Davis), and explicitly measured in others (Zhang, Noels, & Sugita-McEown). The investigation of the impact of the learning environment on learners and teachers will always be a crucial one; Zhang, Noels, and Sugita-McEown show clearly the effects of students and supervisors on English language teachers’ motivation and engagement. There is a clear emphasis here on the dialectical nature of the teaching and learning environment; while the paper does not go so far as to show a truly reciprocal pattern of effects, the authors clearly hint that this may be the case.

Lastly, Organismic Integration Theory (OIT) is the most recognizable mini-theory in language education. Since its initial validation in language education (Noels et al., 2000), it is the most commonly used mini-theory in research on language learning (Al-Hoorie et al., 2022). The studies centrally measuring OIT (Liu; Meristo; Parrish & Vernon) all coincidentally involve students learning languages other than English, though one paper (Liu) treats this as a comparison with English. Parrish and Vernon focus on the learning of languages other than English among adolescents in a school setting, considering the SDT continuum’s utility in comparison with the L2 Motivational Self System (Dörnyei, 2005) when language learning is compulsory. Zhang and colleagues show how autonomous motivation for teaching works in the school context, correlated with student and supervisor actions.

CRITIQUE AND FUTURE EMPIRICAL DIRECTIONS FOR LANGUAGE EDUCATION

Many of the papers in this special issue have added greater focus and refinement to our understanding of the propositions and hypotheses put forth by Deci and Ryan (1985; Ryan & Deci, 2017). As discussed, the papers have given clear focus on the ideas found within certain of the self-determination theory mini-theories. In line with the general trends in the literature (Sugita-McEown & Oga-Baldwin, 2019; Al-Hoorie et al., 2022), BPNT, CET, and OIT have all been well-represented among these articles.

The prevalence of accepted and validated mini-theories within this special issue simultaneously indicates the importance and the need to move on to other aspects of SDT worthy of exploration and validation. As has been very recently noted (Al-Hoorie et al., 2022), it is necessary to

move beyond validating the mini-theories that are well-established. In this special issue, the primary representation of well-debated and well-researched topics has continued. There is a general need to empirically validate the propositions presented by the theory generally (Ryan & Deci, 2017). The lack of coverage of goal contents theory, causality orientations theory, and relationships motivation theory indicates that fully half of the mini-theories have not yet received the attention they deserve. Moving forward, there will be a real need to address this lack to further round out the theory within language education.

As a whole, the papers all lack an important element: objective measures of learning. Though the focus of this special issue is self-determination theory and the focus of this journal is on psychology, the application of these theories and fields to language learning cannot be forgotten. While we applaud the growth of the SDT within language learning, and studies of motivation generally, we do so noting the need for measures of concrete outcomes in relation to the theoretical motivational predictors studied here. Lacking as well are measures tied not only to language learning, but also to the theoretical outcome of eudaimonic functioning and well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Without effective external validation both the theory and the field run the risk of growing in unsustainable directions, or of making claims that no longer align with the theoretical and empirical principles.

Individually, each paper also reveals additional questions that require further exploration in future studies. We present these here in the hope that they will plant the seeds of ideas that future researchers can nurture into successful studies or even full research careers.

Alamer indicates how need satisfaction during the COVID-19 crises can predict students' willingness to seek opportunities for learning outside of school. The paper in many ways dovetails theoretically with the SDT-based volume on the topic edited by other authors in this special issue (Mynard & Shelton-Strong, 2022). Alamer's paper illustrates two important elements, one methodological and one substantive. Methodologically, the use of partial least squares structural equation modelling (PLS-SEM) and its variance-based algorithms is a departure from other studies which use the covariance-based methods, and offers a good example of the heuristics and processes used in assessing these types of models. While the author identifies the

importance of need satisfaction during the pandemic, the models presented are short on details for how teachers can provide a need satisfying environment, or perhaps more importantly and saliently during a lockdown, how learners can be taught to take responsibility and agentically regulate their own needs. While we hope for an end to the public health crisis soon, future interventions can address this question as the world moves toward embracing some aspects of telework and online study.

Davis builds our qualitative knowledge of how the learning environment and post-secondary experiences influence students' sense of need satisfaction and beneficence. The study provides clear indications of the experiences that lead to need satisfaction in learning non-EFL / ESL / EAL world languages. Beyond this, the paper incorporates the prosocial motives that often function at the heart of positive language learning experiences (cf. Gardner, 1985). At the same time, the cross-sectional nature of the study naturally limits our ability to draw conclusions regarding the sustainability and well-being propositions attached to BNPT (Ryan & Deci, 2017) and the literature on beneficence (Martela & Ryan, 2016). Follow up longitudinal studies could expand this, looking into how students have flourished and built greater proficiency in response to their basic need satisfaction noted in their experiences.

Liu's paper provides evidence for differences between motivations to learn different new languages (L2 English and L3 French). The methodological aspects of the paper are strong and sound, and the importance of positive emotions for predicting learner's self-reported behavioral engagement across languages is an important finding. In line with SDT, the author shows that controlled motives are more salient as motives in compulsory courses (e.g., L3 French). This is to be expected, as that which is compulsory, externally rewarded, and of lower personal value will naturally have a lower associated quality of motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2017; Deci, 1972a, 1972b). Though other studies, some related to this one (Liu & Oga-Baldwin, 2022), have explored this topic further, exploration of language differences is needed to verify (or disprove) the position for real motivational differences between language learning processes, à la the Fundamental Difference hypothesis (cf. Al-Hoorie & Hiver, 2020). Importantly, controls for the compulsory versus voluntary nature of course enrollment, as well as students' evaluations of the economic and social

value of the language, are necessary to indicate true motivational differences in the languages themselves.

Meristo's paper is unique in its use of very different samples of students at very different times. From this study, it is clear that the context for learning French in Estonian universities has its own peculiarities. While this may indeed indicate trends and commonalities of students over time, future research must take into consideration appropriate study controls and mixed-methods triangulation to draw effective conclusions on the matter. Beyond this, it would be interesting to see a complete use of the Intrinsic Motivation Index (Ryan, 1982) validated for this context using up-to-date statistical methods and proficiency measures.

Mynard and Shelton-Strong make the case for SDT as a frame for approaching student advising in self-access. While many of the propositions shared in this paper relate to their previously mentioned theoretical and empirical volume on independent language learning (Mynard & Shelton-Strong, 2022), there is nonetheless a need for deeper exploration of the use of self-access for language learning and well-being. Though the authors outline numerous theoretical benefits and relate them to qualitative work from their edited book, there is also a need for quantitative and mixed-methods validation of the context, specifically with regard to learning outcomes and the building of positive, sustainable motivation over time. Given the authors' placement as leaders in self-access, and the affordances that self-access offers for collaborative data gathering toward positive outcomes, we trust that future studies will address this need for validation.

Like Liu and Meristo, Parrish and Vernon compare motives to learn languages other than English. They compare results from studies using OIT, and those using the Second Language Motivation Self-System (L2MSS) developed by Dörnyei (2005). Though the paper does not employ advanced statistics or analyses despite its large sample size, the paper provides insight into how SDT can help us meet investigate the motivation of learners who are not driven by reasons relating to the language itself. Instead of language specific motives (Dörnyei, 2005), this study indicates that learners might engage in language learning activities for reasons more generally associated with schooling (Chanal & Guay, 2015; Al-Hoorie & Hiver, 2020; Oga-Baldwin & Fryer, 2020), and theoretically falling

somewhere on the spectrum of internalization provided by OIT's continuum of motivation. More advanced statistical methods can more effectively illustrate this point, and will be necessary to appropriately validate the distinctions made in the paper.

Zhang, Noels, and Sugita-McEown show how teachers engage in their work environment in relation to their students and supervisors. Though a small cross-sectional sample, the study lays the groundwork for future longitudinal work on motivation for language teaching. More specifically, future large-sample longitudinal studies using appropriate statistical methods can better tease out whether the relationships between student engagement, supervisor support, teachers' need satisfaction, and teacher engagement are unidirectional or reciprocal. This work could provide the mirror side to the work on the reciprocal nature of engagement and disaffection in the classroom (Skinner et al., 2008), showing the complex effects and outcomes of students and work environments on teachers' engagement and well-being.

All told, the special issue offers signs of a strong root structure that can lead to strong and meaningful development. The authors have burrowed deep into the field of language learning to lay the source for upward growth and outward expansion.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

As a final note, 2022 is indeed a special year for self-determination theory, as it marks the 50th anniversary of some of Professor Edward L. Deci's earliest publications, namely "Intrinsic motivation, extrinsic reinforcement, and inequity" in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* and "The effects of contingent and non-contingent rewards and controls on intrinsic motivation" in *Organizational Behavior and Human Performance*. Unforeseen at the time (save perhaps in the mind of the author), these papers marked the emergence of a brand new theory, building toward the 1985 book, and the subsequent current global flowering.

For 50 years now, self-determination theory has been growing tall and strong, pre-empting positive psychology's intent towards a science of the mind that works toward good (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). SDT heralded positive psychology's arrival through an approach to

psychology two decades prior with an approach that is both empirically robust and philosophically deep. Indeed, of the ideas presented by the special issue of *American Psychologist* that launched the branding of positive psychology (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000), it has been arguably the most constant. It has weathered the intervening years and criticisms of the positive psychology movement that have arisen over time (cf. Coyne & Tennen, 2010; Ehrenreich, 2009; Kristjánsson, 2012), largely thanks to its flexibility and capacity to return to its central principles. SDT researchers have even rebutted the non-empirical criticisms presented at the time (Schwartz, 2000) through careful, cross-cultural study (Chen et al., 2015). The current special issue shows how the theory can and will continue to succeed by building from the broad, deep roots that support the system as a whole.

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