

Whether Successful Language Learners Require Intrinsic Motivation

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Abstract

Numerous variables influence the success of language learning. In particular, intrinsic motivation is a key factor in language learning success. Studies examining the relationship between intrinsic motivation and learning performance have provided useful insights into effective teaching styles and successful learning outcomes. This review article explores the association between the good language learner and intrinsic motivation. Research indicates that learners' intrinsic motivation declines developmentally and may lead to decreased academic achievement. Therefore, language learners require intrinsic motivation for learning. This paper also provides pedagogical implications for arousing learners' interests through fostering a learning climate, giving learners more autonomy, and stimulating learners' interests.

Keywords

Good Language Learner, Intrinsic Motivation, Instructional Implications

1. Introduction

Understanding the characteristics that define successful language learners may have useful implications for instructional practice. According to Sykes (2015: p. 713), understanding attributes of successful language learners is a “prerequisites” for promoting language learning. Although various factors influence effective learning, motivation is viewed as the most important factor correlated with successful language learning (Griffiths, 2010; Karagöl, 2008; Liu & Huang, 2011; Ng & Ng, 2015).

This article reviews intrinsic motivation as a critical factor affecting successful second language acquisition. According to Özgür and Griffiths (2013), among other factors, intrinsic motivation has the highest correlation with success in learning. Herein, we examine the effect intrinsic motivation has on a person be-

ing a good language learner, as discussed in the literature.

2. Literature Review

Motivation, an important concept in psychology, is defined as “a kind of central mental engine or energy-center that includes effort, want or will (cognition) and task-enjoyment (affect)” (Gardner, 2010, as cited in Ng & Ng, 2015). Numerous studies have explored the role of motivation in learning because researchers have recognized motivation as a key factor influencing students’ language learning (D’Este, 2012). Many researchers have classified motivation into four types: intrinsic motivation, extrinsic motivation, integrative motivation, and instrumental motivation (e.g., Brown, 2007; Lepper & Corpus, 2005; Necker & McElvany, 2010; Özgür & Griffiths, 2013; Ryan & Deci, 2000; Schunk, Meece, & Pintrich, 2008).

Ryan and Deci (2000) noted that although “intrinsic motivation is not the only form of motivation”, it is “pervasive and important” (p. 56). Thus, three sets of issues, namely the notion of a good language learner, the notion of intrinsic motivation, and the relationship between intrinsic motivation and language learning are presented and critically examined in the following sections.

2.1. The Good Language Learner

The literature on the good language learner can be traced back to the mid-1970s with the publication of Joan Rubin’s 1975 article *What the “good language learner” can teach us* (Griffiths, 2008). Rubin states, “if we knew more about what the ‘successful learners’ did, we might be able to teach these strategies to poorer learners to enhance their success record” (p. 42).

Many definitions of a successful language learner are available. According to Norton and Toohey (2001), the successful language learner has characteristics that differentiate them from less successful learners. Numerous researchers (e.g., Cook, 2013; Dörnyei, 2010; Ellis, 2008; Gardner, 1985; Griffiths, 2008; O’Malley & Chamot, 1990; Rubin, 1975) have investigated the variables that cause learners to learn successfully, such as classroom setting, aptitude, intelligence, motivation, age, personality, sex, metacognition, autonomy, learning style, use of strategies, risk taking, culture, and learning experiences.

Researchers have noted that personality is a key factor affecting success in language learning (Ellis, 2008). Extroverted learners are identified as successful language learners because they actively interact with others and independently create opportunities to practice their language skills in and out of the classroom setting (Lightbrown & Spada, 2006; Sykes, 2015). Good language learners also develop their own learning strategies, such as problem solving in language learning and organizing language information (O’Malley & Chamot, 1990). Motivation, however, is viewed as an essential attribute of successful language learners (Dörnyei & Skehan, 2003; Dörnyei, 2005; Griffiths, 2008; Lightbrown & Spada, 2006; Rubin, 1975). As Sykes (2015) noted, “a lack of any type of motiva-

tion, whether instrumental, integrative or intrinsic, results in failure to learn a second language” (p. 715).

Despite the variety of research perspectives, no unified definition of a good language learner exists. Although a successful learner is identified by many factors, three main elements have the greatest influence, namely personality characteristics, learning strategies, and learning motivation.

2.2. Intrinsic Motivation

Numerous studies have focused on defining intrinsic motivation. As a motivational orientation, intrinsic motivation refers to learners’ attitudes toward “the language, their learning aims and goals, their emotions, their ambitions and so on” (Daskalovska, Gudeva, & Ivanovska, 2012: p. 1189). People with intrinsic motivation exhibit inherent interest and enjoyment (Ryan & Deci, 2000) and participate in an activity “for its own self-sustaining pleasurable rewards of enjoyment, interest, challenge, or skill and knowledge development” (Ushioda, 2008: p. 21). Furthermore, Lee, McInerney, Liem and Ortiga (2010) proposed that elements of intrinsic motivation include feeling enthusiasm for involvement in tasks, “experiencing adventure and novelty, striving for excellence in one’s work, trying to understand something and wishing to improve, and goal direction” (p. 265). In summary, intrinsically motivated learners hold innate and non-driven attitudes toward learning that make them feel satisfaction and joy when they are involved in the learning process.

Intrinsic motivation has several characteristics, and many researchers regard it as a dynamic phenomenon (e.g., Bouffard, Marcoux, Vezeau, & Bordeleau, 2003; Corpus, McClintic-Gilbert, & Hayenga, 2009; Lau, 2009; Lepper & Corpus, 2005; Mega, Ronconi, & Beni, 2014; Ryan & Deci, 2000; Schunk et al., 2008; Spinath & Steinmayr, 2008; Spinath & Steinmayr, 2012). Intrinsic motivation is “time and context dependent” (Schunk et al., 2008: p. 239). Numerous studies have found that intrinsic motivation declines as students age and reach higher grades (e.g., Gottfried, Marcoulides, Gottfried, & Oliver, & Guerin, 2007; Gottfried, Fleming, & Gottfried, 2001; Lepper, Corpus, & Iyengar, 2005). The following table illustrates research findings related to the decline in students’ intrinsic motivation to learn.

As shown in **Table 1**, although researchers have examined the changes in intrinsic motivation in different learning contexts (e.g., Germany, Canada, the United States, and Hong Kong) and academic domains (mathematics, reading, and science), their findings were similar, indicating that intrinsic motivation for learning tends to decline with an increase in age and grade level. Lepper and Corpus (2005) also concluded that “intrinsic motivation appears to decrease developmentally” (p. 193). Changes in intrinsic motivation also vary by individual. Studies have revealed that in different academic domains, intrinsic motivation differs between boys and girls. For example, Bouffard et al. (2003) demonstrated that boys in lower grades (grade one and two) had less motivation for reading,

Table 1. Findings related to the decline in intrinsic motivation.

Researcher(s)	Participants	Academic Domains	Decline in Intrinsic Motivation
Bouffard et al., 2003	Mean age = 84.5 months, Canada	Reading Mathematics	At a different time
Corpus et al., 2009	Grades 3 - 8 Portland, Oregon	Reading Mathematics	Increasing age
Gottfried et al., 2007	Ages 9 - 17 The United States and even abroad	Reading Math Science School in general	From elementary school to high school
Lau, 2009	Grades 4 - 11, Chinese students in Hong Kong	Not mentioned	Through grades
Lepper et al., 2005	Grades 3 - 8, San Francisco Bay Area of California	Math Reading	Across the grade levels
Spinath & Steinmayr, 2008	Grade 3, Elementary school, Germany	School in general Mathematics German	From elementary school age to adolescence
Spinath & Steinmayr, 2012	Grade 11, Elementary school, Germany	School in general Mathematics German	Throughout elementary school and beyond

whereas girls had more positive motivation at the early stage of learning to read. As for math learning, Bouffard et al. discovered that boys' intrinsic motivation remained stable across years, whereas girls experienced a decline in intrinsic motivation as they moved from grades one to two. In addition, Lau's (2009) research revealed that students' intrinsic motivation toward reading declines with age.

In summary, although intrinsic motivation has various definitions, it is generally considered to be the inherent enjoyment of and satisfaction with task engagement. Intrinsic motivation does not remain stable; it decreases as students progress through learning stages with a corresponding increase in age.

2.3. Intrinsic Motivation in Language Learning

On the basis of the theoretical literature concerned with learning a second or foreign language and learners' motivations "from within" (Deci & Flaste, 1996 as cited in Ushioda, 2008: p. 21), in this study, intrinsic motivation was examined in the context of second language acquisition. Several empirical studies have investigated the link between intrinsic motivation and learning achievement and have revealed a positive correlation between intrinsic motivation and successful language learning (e.g., Chang, 2010; Corpus et al., 2009; Dörnyei, 2003; Lee et al., 2010; Karagöl, 2008; Lepper & Corpus, 2005; Mega et al., 2014; Necker & McElvany, 2010; Ryan & Deci, 2000).

According to Gardner (1985) and Karagöl (2008), intrinsic motivation plays a

more critical role in learning than extrinsic motivation because highly motivated learners gain more enjoyment from learning, are more willing to learn, and work harder when being compared with learner with lower motivation. This results in them having greater academic achievements. Furthermore, [Liu and Huang \(2011\)](#) stated that intrinsic motivation “boosts SL/FL [second/foreign language] learning and maintains learners’ efforts to learn the language” (p. 2). As [Ryan and Deci \(2000\)](#) noted, intrinsic motivation is positively associated with “high-quality learning and creativity” (p. 55). Reciprocally, successful language learners who have higher academic achievements are more “confident in their ability and/or experienced more control in their learning” ([Wu, 2003: p. 511](#)). Consequently, successful language learners exhibit greater interest in learning and have higher intrinsic motivation. Thus, the relationship between intrinsic motivation and learning achievement is viewed as concurrent ([Spinath & Steinmayr, 2008: p. 1566](#)) and synergistic ([Corpus et al., 2009: p. 156](#)).

In summary, although intrinsic motivation plays a crucial role in predicting successful language learning, it might be inappropriate to make the conclusion that one who has intrinsic motivation will definitely become a good language learner because other variables may influence successful language learning. The following section will review some instructional implications for helping learners become more successful.

3. Pedagogical Implications for Teaching

Motivation is regarded as an essential component of being a good language learner. Aforementioned issues related to intrinsic motivation indicate that intrinsic motivation drives the learning process ([Guilloteaux & Dörnyei, 2008](#)). However, intrinsic motivation decreases at different stages of the learning process. Thus, understanding how to maintain and develop language learner’s motivation and sustain impetus toward learning seems crucial to achieving learning success.

Teachers’ teaching styles and instructional initiatives influence learners’ motivation. According to [Daskalovska et al. \(2012\)](#), “one of the tasks of the teacher is to awaken, sustain and strengthen learner’s motivation” (p. 1190). In this section, the pedagogical implications of prompting intrinsic motivation toward successful language learning are examined with a focus on three aspects: learning environment, learner autonomy, and learning interest.

First, researchers have identified that learning environment (e.g., [Harmer, 2001; Wu, 2003](#)) affects the development of intrinsic motivation. [Ng and Ng \(2015\)](#) noted that teachers should “create a safe classroom environment, a supportive atmosphere for learners in the class with mutual trust and respect and with low levels of anxiety and stress” (p. 26). According to [Harmer \(2001: pp. 53-54\)](#),

Teachers can do a lot about both aspects by decorating the classroom with visual materials, using music, or moving the furniture if necessary, as well

as by “building positive relationship with the learners, creating a supportive and cooperative environment and being careful when responding to learners, especially when giving feedback and corrections”.

In addition, Oxford and Shearin (1994) suggested that teachers can decorate the classroom to create “a welcoming, positive place where psychological needs are met and where language anxiety is kept to a minimum” (as cited in Özgür & Griffiths, 2013: p. 1112).

Second, learners should be allowed more autonomy in learning, which fosters intrinsic motivation. Research has illustrated that learners achieved greater learning outcomes if they believed that they had autonomy in their learning (Dickinson, 1995; Karagöl, 2008). Jones, Llacer-Arrastia, and Newbill (2009) explained that learners would “feel competent, and develop satisfying relationships with others” when they are “autonomy oriented” (p. 174). Control is viewed as “an important determinant” (Schunk et al., 2008: p. 252) of intrinsic motivation because it can “cultivate a sense of autonomy” (Wu, 2003: p. 503), allowing learners the freedom to make their own choices and giving them a sense of control over their learning outcomes. For example, Matthews (1991) found that children can be intrinsically driven to learn and to perform well in academic domains such as reading, social studies, and science. Moreover, Valas and Sovik (1993 as cited in Karagöl, 2008) noted that learners who felt they had more autonomy in learning had higher intrinsic motivation and became more competent at math. Therefore, it is recommended that teachers create and enhance awareness of autonomy in learners. Teachers can allow students to make decisions about learning sources or grading each other’s learning performance (Bomia et al., 1997), selecting assignments (McKinney, 2006), and choosing their learning content and approaches (Malone & Lepper, 1987).

Third, teachers should maintain learners’ motivation and avoid loss of interest in learning. Interest, although not a type of motivation, is an influence on motivation and plays a role in maintaining and developing intrinsic motivation (Schunk et al., 2008: p. 239). Ur (1996) stated that “it is the arousing of interest, perhaps, that teachers invest most effort, and get immediate and noticeable pay-off in terms of learner motivation” (p. 280). Numerous researchers (e.g., Lepper et al., 2005) have suggested that students’ intrinsic motivation toward learning can be enhanced by increasing their interest in classroom instruction; learners with an interest in learning are more motivated and engaged in learning. As Liu and Huang (2011) explained, improving learners’ interest in language learning enables them to feel less stressed and anxious. Thus, in language teaching practice, teachers could make language learning more enjoyable to boost students’ enjoyment and interest in second language acquisition, such as by using diverse topics (Harmer, 2001), designing engaging class activities and tasks (Harmer, 2001; Ng & Ng, 2015), selecting an assortment of texts (Ng & Ng, 2015), employing various teaching aids (e.g., visuals or audiovisuals) (Ng & Ng, 2015; Ur, 1996), and “providing entertainment in the form of jokes, stories,

dramatic presentations, movies, video clips, television documentaries, role-play, information gap activities, etc” (Ur, 1996: p. 280).

Along with the three aforementioned aspects, those seeking to develop language learners’ intrinsic motivation should also account for influences on motivation, such as the decline in motivation with age. For example, Wu (2003) suggested that “the intrinsic motivation of young foreign language learners could be stimulated from the beginning” (p. 502). Furthermore, rewards can raise intrinsic motivation to some extent (e.g., Cameron, Pierce, Banko, & Gear, 2005; Schunk et al., 2008). As Cameron et al. (2005) indicated, “rewards for achievement may convey information about one’s ability, mastery, or competence,” which may enhance self-efficacy and develop intrinsic motivation (p. 643). Rewards should be connected to learners’ “progress, skill improvement, learning and competence,” thus making students “believe they can learn and receive the rewards signifies progress in learning” (Schunk et al., 2008: p. 265). Thus, instructional options for the development of intrinsic reward could involve designing “positive self-talk, guided self-evaluation, and mastery of specific goals, rather than comparison with other students” (Oxford & Shearin, 1996, as cited in Özgür & Griffiths, 2013: p. 1112).

4. Conclusion

Factors such as personality, attitude, cognitive style, learning strategies, age and anxiety are related to successful language learning. In this article, evidence for the notion of a good language learner is critically examined from the perspective of intrinsic motivation.

Research on intrinsic motivation provides evidence for the notion of a good language learner. The literature indicates that intrinsic motivation is an essential factor in language learning because it provides internal impetus to learn a language (Dörnyei, 2005) and concerns the commitment and magnitude of learning. However, intrinsic motivation is not static; rather, it depends on the situational context. It appears to decline developmentally and may lead to a decrease in learning achievement. Thus, a person with intrinsic motivation may not necessarily be a successful learner. Concerning the characteristics of motivation and its relationship with language learning achievement, this paper focuses on discussing instructional implications from three aspects: learning setting, learner autonomy, and learning interest. According to several empirical studies’ findings, these aspects could increase individual’s intrinsic motivation. Thus, the findings of this paper have practical implications for teachers attempting to foster successful learning and can enrich teachers’ understanding of strategies for increasing learners’ motivation; they can apply the aforementioned factors in designing their teaching strategies and tailoring teaching materials.

According to Ushioda (2008: p. 23), determining whether motivational factors are “internalized and self-determined, or externally imposed and regulated by others” is the principal challenge that teachers and learners must face, rather

than distinguishing whether learning motivation is intrinsic or extrinsic. Therefore, key considerations for teaching and learning are how to sustain learners' motivation and retain their engagement with learning activities as well as help them tolerate frustrations and persevere in the face of impatience or boredom in language learning.

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