SUPPORTING STUDENTS' SELF-DETERMINED MOTIVATION TO LEARN LANGUAGES

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Abstract

There are many reasons, some of which are better than others for sustaining motivation over the long run. Research evidence suggests that a personally relevant, self-engaged, and inherently interested orientation to language study supports engagement in the learning process, and thereby a variety of positive learning outcomes. Moreover, feelings of pressure, whether from others or self-imposed, can undermine motivation. Teachers can effectively foster students' self-determined motivation by supporting their sense of autonomy, competence, and connectedness with other people. Drawing from recent conceptualizations of language learning motivation as a complex, dynamic system, I point out how reasons, engagement, and feelings of autonomy, competence, and relatedness reciprocally influence each other across the duration of the language course. Likewise, I discuss how students' motivational orientation and engagement and teachers' motivational orientation and engagement mutually interact in a transactional relationship.

For many decades, teachers and researchers have observed that motivated students tend to experience more successful outcomes in a language course than less motivated students. Although most would agree that motivation is important, pinning down what we mean by "motivation" is a tricky business, because it means many things to many people. According to Gardner (2006, p. 2), the motivated individual is "goal directed, expends effort, is persistent, is attentive, has desires (wants), exhibits positive affect, is aroused, has expectancies, demonstrates self-confidence (self-efficacy), and has reasons..." for learning a language. Two aspects of Gardner's depiction are the focus of the work to be discussed herein. The first is the notion of effort, persistence and attention, which Gardner called "motivational intensity". This aspect reflects a person's cognitive and behavioural engagement in the learning process, and has been demonstrated by Gardner and his colleagues to be the most consistent predictor of proficiency in the language (see Gardner, 2010, for review). To the extent that language proficiency is a primary goal of language courses, this facet of motivation would be important to understand. The second aspect is the learners' reasons for acquiring a language, which are important because they give meaning to the learning process, affecting the quality of the experience. As well, some

reasons are more likely than others to sustain engagement in the learning process.

I argue that students' reasons influence their engagement because they reflect students' experience of self-determination in the language learning process. Drawing from Deci and Ryan's (1985, 2002) Self-Determination Theory, the more students feel they are engaging in the language learning because they want to (vs. feel they have to), the more they will expend effort, persist, and invest in the learning process, and the more likely they will be to experience positive consequences, such as strong grades, greater proficiency, and willingness to communicate in the target language. If teachers and other significant people in the learners' social world support learners' feelings of autonomy, as well as their feelings of competence and connectedness to others, we can foster a stronger self-determined orientation in their students. In turn, self-determined, engaged students can foster self-determined motivation in language instructors. To make this argument, I will outline a framework for categorizing reasons for language learning, describe research indicating that a self-determined orientation fosters student engagement, show that teachers have a role to play in supporting students' self-determination, and show that student engagement reciprocally influences teachers' motivation.

Orientations for Learning Languages: The Self-Determination Continuum

People report many, many reasons for learning another language—the Centre for Languages, Linguistics and Area Studies in the UK lists at least 700 (www.llas.ac.uk/700reasons). It is, of course, impossible to investigate so many diverse reasons for language learning, and so it is expedient to categorize them in some way. Rather than categorizing them thematically (e.g., travel, knowledge, job, friendship), we use a theoretical model that categorizes reasons in terms of their functional significance for motivation. Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985, 2002) posits that we are more likely to deeply engage in an activity in a creative and fulfilling manner when it fulfills our innate psychological need to be autonomous agents in our own lives, and also our needs to competently pursue our interests while feeling supported in these pursuits by significant others around us. Our reasons for engaging in an activity can reflect the extent to which we feel that engagement in the activity fulfills these needs, particularly the need for autonomy. Figure 1 outlines a continuum of orientations organized by the degree to which they are regulated by the self (i.e., are autonomous) or by circumstances/persons external to the person (i.e., are controlled). At one extreme (at the top of the figure) is intrinsic motivation, when one engages in an activity because it is inherently satisfying because it fulfills these psychological needs. Intrinsically motivated learners experience a sense of flourishing during the process of mastering complex materials and developing their competencies. At the other extreme (at the bottom of the figure) is amotivation, which describes people who see absolutely no point in learning another language. Generally, these "amotivated" people would not register in a language course, but if they do, perhaps because of institutional requirements,

they would likely quit actively studying the language as soon as they possibly could (and perhaps even resist learning the language altogether; cf. Norton, 2013).

Orientation	Example
Intrinsic Motivation	"I was hooked on German from the beginning. I learned how to count to 10 + that was all it took. I did about 1 month of browsing through some old text books, learned what the nom, acc, dat and genitive definite articles were and then started 101 (which was intensely satisfying). I feel good and excited by it." -English Canadian learner of German
Integrated Regulation	"I am learning Chinese because my Chinese background is very important to me. Despite being very "North-American-ized" or "white-washed", I think it is so important that I don't lose this part of myself which is so fundamental and easy to lose as well… I suppose my reason, then, is because I want to." -Chinese Canadian heritage language learner
Identified Regulation	"Having worked as a graphic designer for 8 years, I'd like to try and find work in Germany in this field and having the language skills is a major benefit." - English Canadian learners of German
Introjected Regulation	"I want to speak English like a native speaker so that people back in Korea will recognize me and remember me as a person who speaks English really well." -Korean learner of English
External Regulation	"Get a job, General education requirements, Mom wants me to." -English American learner of Spanish
Amotivation	"The school is making me. I don't know why. I'm a Bio major and I want to be an astronaut. This isn't fair. I didn't like Spanish in high school and I don't like it now. If I wanted to learn another language, I would do it without tests, quizzes, and "language labs". With every fiber of my being, I wish I didn't have to take this class." -Bio Major learner of Spanish

Self-Determination ↑

Figure 1. Self-Determination Continuum of Motivational Orientations

Between these two extremes, lies a set of reasons that can be described as extrinsically motivating, in the sense that the reason for engagement does not come from enjoyment of the activity per se. These reasons vary in the extent to which they arise from the learner's personal goals and values (i.e., autonomous), or are governed by contingencies that are external to the learner (i.e., controlled). A prototypical example of extrinsic motivation is external regulation, in which a person engages in language learning because of a clear contingency set up by circumstances or a specific person, such as educational or occupational promotion or a reward or punishment that will be delivered by a teacher or a parent. Another modestly internalized set of reasons is introjected regulation, which likewise emphasizes pressures or privileges, but these are meted out by the individual learner. For instance, a learner might feel an obligation to learn the language in order to avoid feelings of guilt or shame for not doing so or to garner a sense of prestige and recognition for being so clever. A more internalized orientation is identified regulation, whereby learners have identified

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the activity as a means to achieve some important end. For instance, knowing a language might facilitate the pursuit of a career that a person enjoys and values. This reason does not reflect an external or internal pressure (such as a secure salary or an obligation), but rather it is self-determined, in the sense that the learner has chosen to learn the language because it will help to achieve a goal that is personally important. A final set of orientations is integrated regulation, whereby the language is completely integrated with the person's other goals and values, such that using the language would be an expression of the person's sense of self.

This taxonomy is useful for organizing a variety reasons for language learning. It is important to note that learners can hold more than one reason for learning a language. For instance, this Chinese-Canadian learner indicates multiple reasons for learning, which could be categorized as external, introjected, and identified regulation, as well as intrinsic motivation.

> I am learning Chinese in order to prove to myself and my family that I am capable of speaking, writing and reading Chinese, Also, I believe that having Chinese as a second language can lead to better job opportunities. If I go to China, or Hong Kong (which I have plans to go there in a few years) it will be very helpful to be able to communicate with other Chinese people. Lastly, in general, I find learning languages to be fun and interesting. (Chinese-Canadian heritage language learner; cited in Comanaru & Noels, 2009, p. 149)

Moreover, learners in different contexts may typically endorse certain kinds of orientations. In a study of ESL, heritage language, and modern language students (Noels et al, 2015), we found that students in each group endorsed reasons that could be categorized across the self-determination continuum or with reference to Gardner's (2010) integrative orientation, which refers to reasons for learning a language pertaining to a desire to interact with members of the target ethnolinguistic group (see Figure 2). Relative to the other groups, however, ESL students were more likely to emphasize that they needed to learn the language because of educational requirements or pressure from parents (i.e., external regulation); heritage learners were more likely to emphasize that the language was important to their sense of self (i.e., integrated regulation); and although modern-language students had reasons that were more evenly distributed across the categories, they expressed more reasons that were categorized as intrinsic motivation.
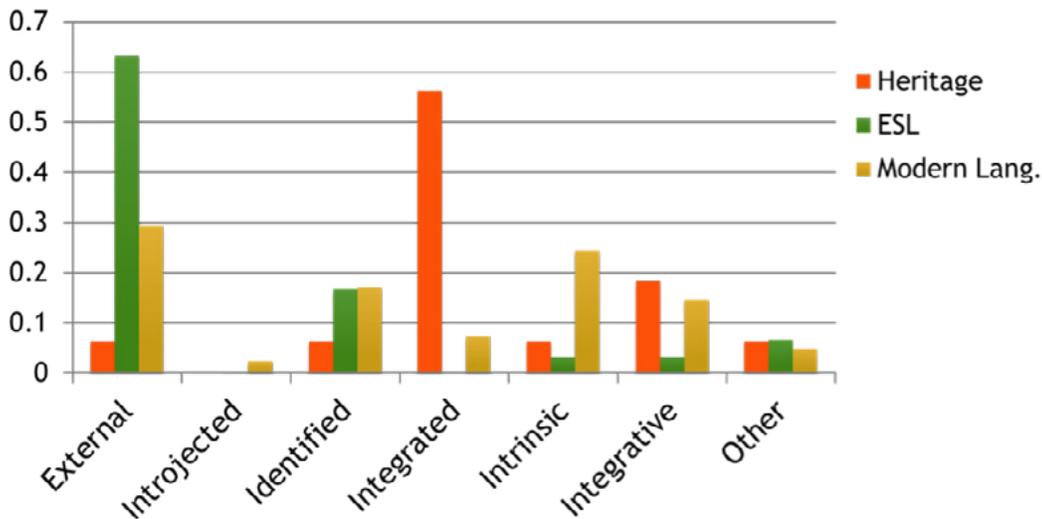
Figure 2. Orientations identified in various groups of second language learners (adapted from Noels et al., 2015).

Implications of a Self-Determined Orientation

Regardless of the context of learning, research consistently shows that the more learners endorse a self-determined orientation, the more likely they are to engage deeply and positively with the learning process and the more likely they are to experience positive outcomes. Compared to less self-determined learners, they exhibit greater motivational intensity and greater intention to continue studying the language even after the course is completed (Noels, et al, 1999, 2001; Noels, 2001a, 2005; Comanaru & Noels, 2009; Sugita McEown, Noels, & Saumure, 2014). They also report using more active learning strategies (Ehrman, 1996; Tachibana, Matsukawa, & Zhong, 1996; Bonney, Cortina, Smith0Darden, & Fiori, 2008), and the process of learning is likely to be more enjoyable, as learners experience less anxiety, greater curiosity, and have more positive attitudes in class (Ehrman, 1996; Noels, et al, 1999; Noels, 2001; Carreira, 2011). Perhaps not surprisingly then, they have greater success developing their communicative competence, as evidenced by better grades, greater speaking and reading proficiency, and greater grammatical sensitivity (Ehrman, 1996; Alsheikh & Elhoweris, 2011; Kim, 2011). They are also more likely to experience more positive outcomes outside of the classroom, such as greater frequency and quality of contact with the target language community, greater willingness to communicate in the target language, and more use of the target language outside of the classroom (Noels, 2001; Peng & Woodrow, 2020).

Based on these research findings, we can posit a causal sequence in which motivational orientations predict engagement in the learning process, and this engagement predicts a variety of linguistic and non-linguistic outcomes (Noels, 2009; see also Vallerand et al., 1992,1993; Skinner, Wellborn, & Connell, 1990; see Figure 4). Recent research, however, suggests that this unidirectional causal sequence might not be quite accurate, and that a more dynamic model involving reciprocal relations between variables over time might

better describe the motivational process. We examined motivation in English Canadian university-level learners of French over their first semester of their French course, and we found that intrinsic motivation predicted greater effort in language learning, but only from the midterm to the end of the course. Instead, we found that students who invest effort into learning the language at the beginning of the course, come to like it by the midterm, and this greater engagement causes them to become increasingly engaged by the end of course. Moreover, greater effort continues to "feed" greater intrinsic motivation throughout the course: it seems we come to like what we invest our energy in, and over time, we engage more in the activity we find enjoyable. Thus the results suggest that it is better to think of the relations between these variables as a dynamic motivational system. An implication of such a model is that the dynamic of a student's motivational process could be changed by either encouraging the student to work harder or, later in the course, by helping the student to find pleasure in learning the language.
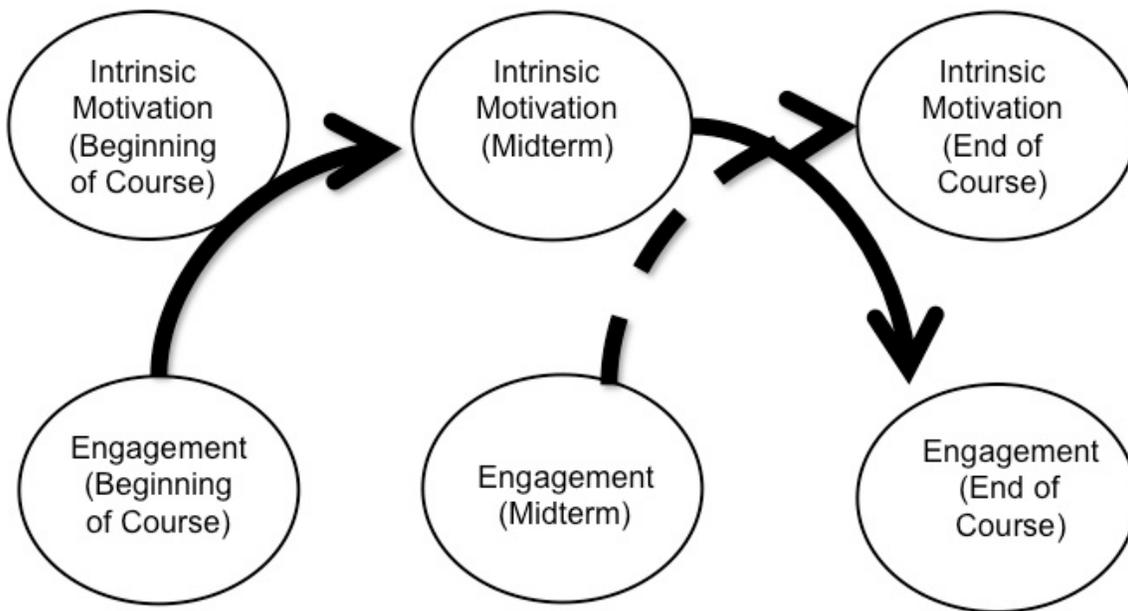

Figure 3. Dynamic flow of engagement and motivation.

Supporting students' motivation

How can teachers foster a self-determined orientation in their students? In their Self-Determination Theory, Deci and Ryan (1985, 2002) posit that teachers (and others) can foster learners' self-determination and engagement by supporting learners' basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Autonomy refers to a sense that one has made a conscious and voluntary decision to engage in a personally relevant activity.

Competence refers to the sense of being effective in performing the activity and having the capacity to rise to optimal challenges. Relatedness refers to a sense of secure and satisfying connections with others in one's social ecology. Teachers can support these "needs" by through their teaching practices (Noels, 2001a; Wu, 2008). A teacher can encourage (or discourage) students' feelings of autonomy by providing opportunities for students' to make choices that allow them to learn the language in a way that is relevant to them. Assor Kaplan and Roth (2002) found that the best promoter of autonomy and engagement was linking the students' personal interests and goals to the schoolwork. Teachers can support competence by providing clear goals, and learning frameworks (Jang, Reeve, & Deci, 2010). Teachers can promote a sense of relatedness by expressing interest and empathy, and assuring students' security during the risky business of language learning.
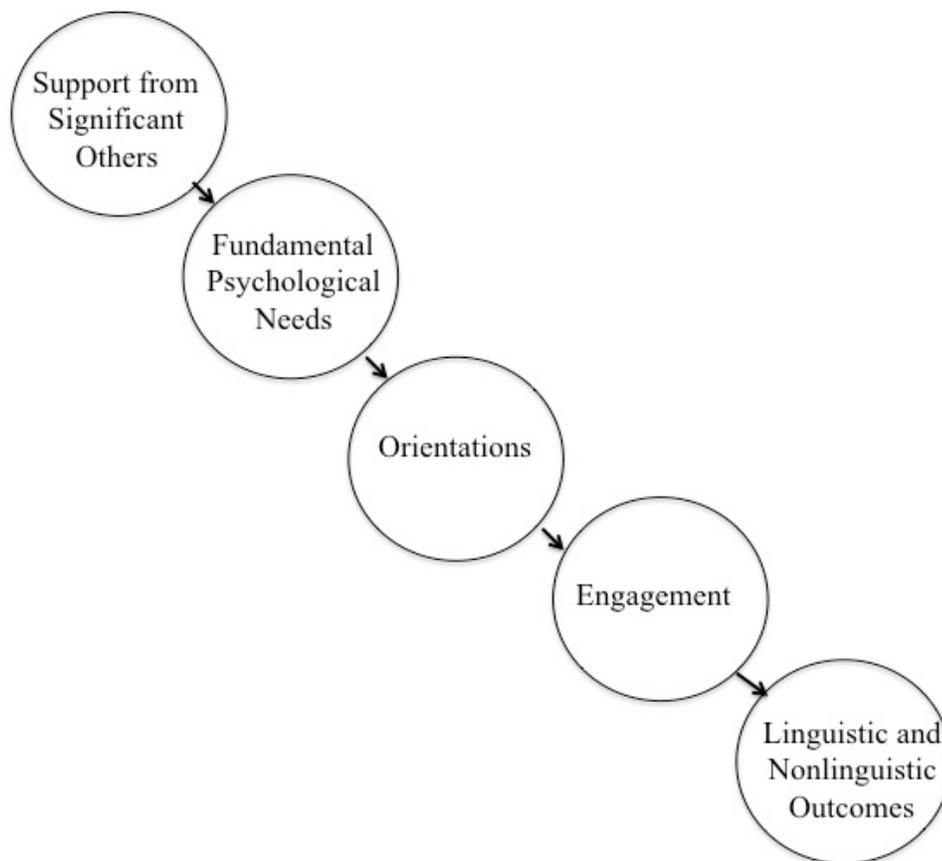

Figure 4. Hypothesized causal model of the motivation process.

To test this more complete model, we asked university students enrolled in diverse language courses about their motivational orientations, their feelings of autonomy, competence, and relatedness, and their perceptions of their teachers' support of their autonomy, competence, and relatedness. We used the same longitudinal design as in the earlier study, following students from the beginning of their language course, through to the midterm and then to the end of the semester. As with the findings reported above,

we found that these variables are interrelated, but their relations were more complicated than the unidimensional causal model proposed by the theory. As portrayed in Figure 5, throughout the course, the more students reported that they were learning the language because it was intrinsically interesting and enjoyable, the more they later felt autonomous. Although these two variables are related, the pattern contradicts the hypothesized causal direction, in which a students' sense of autonomy predicts a self-determined orientation. We also did not find support for the simple hypothesis that (perceived) autonomy support from the teacher at the beginning of the course affected students' feelings of autonomy and intrinsic motivation later in the course, but instead the converse: the more a student felt autonomous and intrinsically motivated at the beginning, the more they felt that their teacher was autonomy supportive by the midterm. In the later half of the course, the relation between (perceived) autonomy-support from the teacher became reciprocal, such that the more the teacher was perceived as autonomy supportive, the more the student felt autonomous at the end of the course (consistent with the hypothesis), and vice versa. In sum, we see again reciprocal relations that this time suggest that teachers not only affect students' motivation, but students influence what the teacher does (in so far as students accurately report their teachers' actions; cf., Guilloteaux & Dörnyei, 2008; Bernaus & Gardner, 2008).
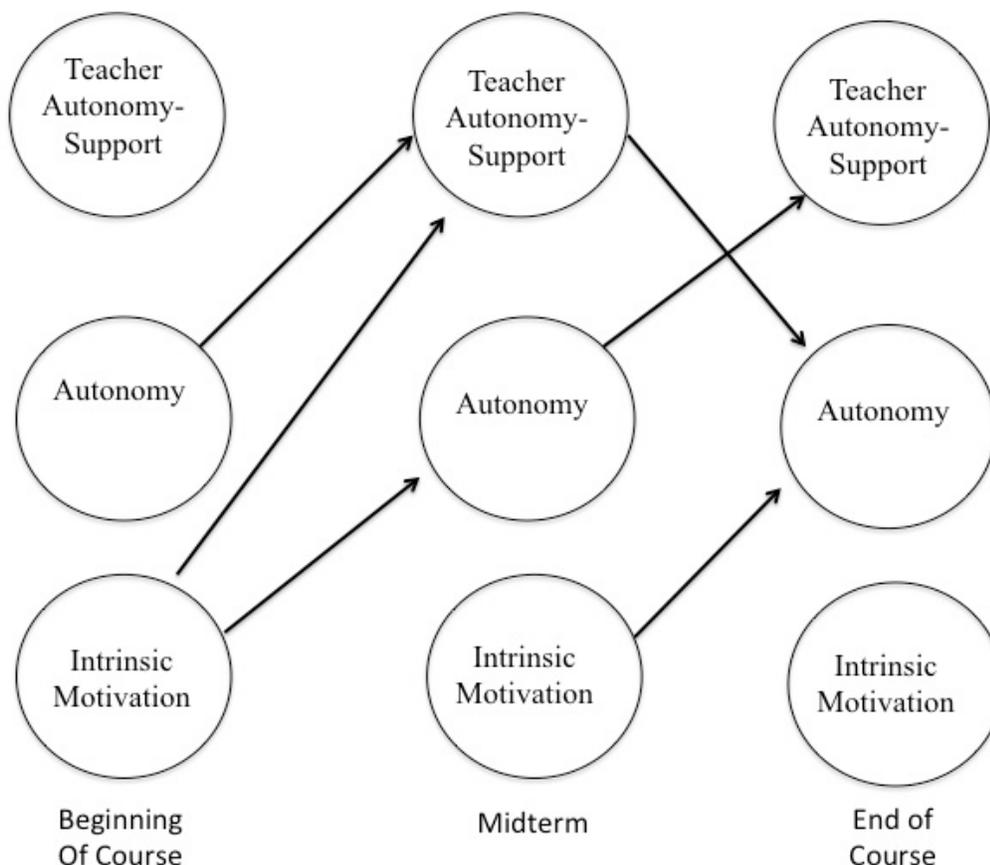

Figure 5. Causal model of the motivation process based on student responses.

Supporting Teachers' Motivation

The results showing that teachers and students can reciprocally influence on another are intriguing. We decided to follow up this study with a complementary examination of language teachers' motivation towards their work to see whether their perceptions of students and significant others impact their motivation (Noels & Sugita McEown, 2015). Members of TESL Ontario completed an online survey assessing their motivational orientations towards their work and their engagement in their teaching (defined in terms of energy, dedication, and absorption); the support they felt they received from their immediate supervisor in terms of autonomy, competence, and relatedness; and how engaged they felt their students were in learning the language. The results showed that the more they endorsed a self-determined reason for learning the language (i.e., the more they found teaching to be intrinsically rewarding, personally important and consistent with their sense of self), the greater was their energy and dedication to teaching, and the less they reported intentions of quitting the job. More controlled orientations (e.g., feeling that they were doing the job for the salary or because they felt obligated to continue) were unrelated to these outcomes, and having no reason for teaching (i.e., amotivation) was related to less energy, less absorption and dedication to teaching and a greater intention to stop teaching in the near future.

The analyses also indicated that the teachers' orientations were linked to their perceptions of their immediate supervisor. The perceived warmth and interpersonal involvement of the supervisor (i.e. their relatedness) supported teachers' intrinsic and self-determined motivation. The more the supervisor was perceived to support the teachers' autonomy, the more likely teachers were to report that they were teaching because it was personally important and a central way in which they self-identified (i.e., identified and integrated regulation, respectively), and less likely they were to report that they were teaching because of the external rewards, such as salary and job security, or because they felt obligated to do so (i.e., external and introjected regulation, respectively).

Although the supervisor had an important impact on teachers' orientations to their work, the (perceived) students' engagement was also a strong predictor of these motivational orientations. The more teachers perceived their students to be engaged in learning, the more they reported that they were teaching the language because it was personally important, was consistent with their sense of self, and yielded a sense of flourishing. If students were perceived to be disengaged, teachers reported a less self-determined orientation and were more likely to say that they were doing it because they had to (i.e., for salary, security, feelings of obligation), and that they had no good reason for learning the language (i.e., amotivation). This pattern of findings suggests an important reciprocal connection between what teachers do and what students do, and suggests that greater research attention to the teacher-student relationship in language learning contexts is merited.

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Conclusion

In sum, I have argued that a useful way to frame students' reasons for learning a language is in terms of how much those reasons reflect greater and lesser self-determination. A more self-determined orientation has a range of implications regarding the kinds of outcomes that we generally hope will be developed in a language course. That said, the relations between students' orientations and their engagement in learning is complex and variable over time. Despite this complexity, teachers can promote a self-determined orientation in their students by promoting their sense of autonomy, competence and relatedness. Not only can such an orientation foster greater student engagement and positive learning outcomes, it might also have important implications for teachers' own motivation.

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