



Predicting self-concept, interest and achievement for first-year students: The seeds of lifelong learning



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ABSTRACT

After achievement, academic self-concept and interest are essential learning outcomes in the transition to higher education and then lifelong learning. The current study examines self-concept, instrumental goals, interest and three types of achievement in the context of English language learning at one Japanese university. First-year students ($n = 381$) from seven departments participated in a yearlong study, completing surveys at three time points. Course grade, pre–post standardized English language proficiency tests and a final vocabulary test were also included in modeling.

The self-concept and proficiency students come to university with play a substantial role in their future motivation and achievement. Distal internally regulated goals had the overall largest predictive effect on future personal interest. A small/moderate predictive gender effect on self-concept, prior ability and distal internally regulated goals was also observed. Male students are entering university at a distinct disadvantage to female students, a trend widely observed throughout formal education. Implications for practice are discussed.

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1. Introduction

There is a growing consensus that in addition to supplying the world's youth with fundamental education and young adults with specialized knowledge and skills, that educators have a responsibility to support students in the development of the confidence and adaptive motivation which are both necessary for life-long learning (Lüftenecker et al., 2012). These ideas strongly overlap with the latent constructs self-concept and interest.

Enhancing academic self-concept and interest, while supporting student achievement, are essential and intertwined components of formal education. An early meta-analysis found that academic self-concept consistently exhibits substantial relationships with achievement in the same domain (Hansford & Hattie, 1982). Sophisticated modeling since has regularly supported a reciprocal relationship between self-concept and academic achievement (Marsh & Craven, 2006). Citing a need to integrate two fundamental determinants of learning outcomes, Marsh, Trautwein, Ludtke, Koller, and Baumert (2005) extended the reciprocal model to include interest. Findings from this body of research suggest that the path to academic success lies with improving neither self-concept/interest nor achievement development individually, but both, simultaneously. Clearly this finding is directly relevant to classroom instruction, but not so easily translated into classroom practice. Supporting classroom achievement, while not simple, is more

straightforward than helping students to develop interest and self-concept, although learning environments should support all three. Recent research and reviews examining the role of internal versus external goal regulation (Fryer, Carter, Ozono, Nakao, & Anderson, 2013; Fryer, Ginns, & Walker, 2014; Vansteenkiste, Soenens, Verstuyf, & Lens, 2009) may be in a strong position to contribute to these important educational aims.

All learning is propelled at least partially by students' goals. This reality and psychological research examining the quality of individual motivation (Kasser & Ryan, 1993), has led to a substantial body of educational research (for a review see Vansteenkiste, Lens, & Deci, 2006). Research examining students' instrumental goals has demonstrated that how learning is framed for students, can have a powerful effect on a range of outcomes, which include persistence and enjoyment as well as achievement (Vansteenkiste, Simons, Soenens, & Lens, 2004). Based on these results and parallel correlational research (Simons, Dewitte, & Lens, 2004), the current study examined the potential role of three goal types on students' future personal interest, within a reciprocal model of achievement and self-concept. This was undertaken within a lagged structural model, employing three time points, and accounting for prior standardized proficiency achievement and self-concept, as well as yearlong course grades.

1.1. Background

1.1.1. Self-concept

During the past four decades self-concept has developed from a general to a detailed multi-dimensional theory of self-perception of

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competency (Marsh & Hattie, 1996). Based on an integration of the research of the time, Shavelson, Huber, and Stanton (1976) suggested that an individual's self-perceptions are developed through reflective experience with their environment. Empirical research during the four decades following Shavelson et al.'s (1976) work has with increasing precision established the role and nature of self-concept. While initial research suggested that self-concept was uni-dimensional (Rosenberg, 1965), consistent findings have established that a multi-dimensional model best explains this self-construct (Marsh & Craven, 2006).

In educational contexts, research has demonstrated that self-concept is an important predictor of future achievement. The simultaneous latent modeling of the relationship between academic self-concept and achievement has established that the two have a reciprocal relationship (Marsh & Martin, 2011). Self-concept and achievement are therefore both essential presage and outcome components of the learning process. In addition to its role within future achievement, research has shown that self-concept is a factor in students' future course selections (Marsh & Yeung, 1997). Related to these findings is the broad support for the role of perceptions of ability for goal setting and goal persistence (Zimmerman, 2000). Correlative research has as indicated that academic self-concept is positively related to adaptive learning goals while negatively related to maladaptive goals for learning (Murayama & Elliot, 2009).

While self-concept is both an important predictor and outcome across educational contexts, Köller et al. (2001) posited that the importance of students' personal interest increases as students transition to learning environments which are less structured. A substantial increase in opportunities for learner autonomy is a hallmark of the transition from secondary to higher education. Interest is therefore an essential component of this transition and an important outcome for the current study.

1.1.2. *The nature of and predicting future personal interest*

Interest has the rare honor of being an exceedingly complex psychological construct which everyone implicitly understands – at least in broad strokes. Researchers in the field, however, have generally agreed that interest is made up of both cognitive and affective components (Hidi, 1990). Interest is generally divided into personal and situational components that have been integrated into a developmental model of how interest is constructed longitudinally (Hidi & Renninger, 2006). Personal interest is broadly perceived as the intrinsic desire to understand, which an individual brings to new experiences. Situational interest, however, describes the spontaneous positive affect and curiosity inspired in large part by the environment. This type of interest fluctuates across the range of experiences an individual faces and is hypothesized as potentially leading to personal interest (Hidi & Renninger, 2006).

The current study is concerned with the personal interest students experience following a yearlong course in English as a foreign language during their first year at university. Past research has suggested that interest is related to both achievement and self-concept (e.g., Marsh et al., 2005). More specifically, both achievement and self-concept have been found to have a predictive relationship with future personal interest in a domain of study. These effects, while certainly an important part of understanding future personal interest, fail to acknowledge the role of an individual's choice within their future motivational states. Self theories have modeled choice as an essential mechanism for supporting students in the development of increasingly intrinsic sources of motivation such as interest (Deci & Ryan, 1985). While this may come about through opportunities from the environment to pursue increasingly internally regulated motivation, it may also arise from the individuals, as personally meaningful instrumental goals for learning. Self-determination theory has focused substantial research on the difference between extrinsic and intrinsic goals (e.g., Kasser & Ryan, 1993; Ryan, Sheldon, Kasser, & Deci, 1996). This distinction is concerned chiefly with the “what” of an individual's motivation. Intrinsic goals are focused on aspects of life

such as personal growth and the satisfaction of fundamental innate needs. Extrinsic goals, however, are theorized as not being aligned with an individual's innate needs but instead are aimed towards benefits accrued from others, such as fame and wealth (Kasser & Ryan, 1993). Supplemental to this theory is that extrinsic goals are not all equal, and that some extrinsic goals may be instrumental towards the satisfaction of basic innate needs as well (Sheldon, Ryan, Deci, & Kasser, 2004). Self-determination theory's Organismic Integration Theory is chiefly a model of motivational regulation (Ryan & Deci, 2000). This model is described as a continuum from no regulation (amotivation), external regulation (extrinsic motivation) and finally internal regulation of (intrinsic) motivation. An individual's motivation is therefore shaped not only by the “what”, which is the intrinsic or extrinsic content of their goals but also the locus of control experienced when pursuing a goal. This is of particular importance when examining the broad range of instrumental (extrinsic) goals individuals pursue, and the external to internal regulation students might experience. These are salient issues in the context of learning because internally regulated goals are related to mastery/task goals and deep processing (Fryer et al., 2014; Simons et al., 2004). The link between instrumental goals and their internal regulation is exemplified by research (Simons, Dewitte, & Lens, 2000), which has indicated that even goals with clearly extrinsic content can be adaptive if individual's perceive them as internally regulated.

In addition to the type of regulation students experience during goal pursuits, Simons et al. (2004) suggested that students' instrumental goals for studying could be modeled as ranging from entirely proximal (this year and graduation) to distal (future life, post graduation). Future time perspective theories posit that the temporal distance of a goal and the degree to which an individual is future orientated can play an essential role within students' persistence and performance (Husman & Lens, 1999; Lens, Simons, & Dewitte, 2002). Simons et al. (2004) modeled internal versus external regulation of goals and thereby established a 2 (distal/proximal) \times 2 (internally/externally regulated) instrumental goal framework. This model bridged the importance of a goal's regulation and its temporal distance. Simons et al. (2004) tested this model in the highly instrumental context of a nursing college in Belgium. The results of Simons et al.'s (2004) study were clear: mediated by mastery goals, internally regulated goals had a broad range of positive predictive effects on students' reported persistence, excitement and deep level processing. In addition, Simons et al. found that distal versus proximal utility of an individual's goals had a separate similar positive effect on task orientation: perceived distal utility, relative to proximal, had a strong positive effect on task orientation. Simons et al. (2004) concluded that the pairing of distal utility with internal regulation of a goal was the most adaptive for learning.

1.1.3. *First year university experiences*

First-year at university is the beginning of students' final engagement with formal education. This is a period of education upon which much of students' future rests (Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini, 2004). First-year university is a significant adjustment from high school (Briggs, Clark, & Hall, 2012), with regard to demands, peers and the types of motivation which fuel students' engagement and achievement. Students come to university with goals, both academic and non-academic. Goals play a role in shaping their learning but in turn are shaped by the environment (e.g., Ames, 1992), students' achievement (e.g., Zimmerman, Bandura, & Martinez-Pons, 1992) and self-perspectives (e.g., Schunk, 1991). The dynamic relationship between competency and the goals students set is an area of research that has chiefly been researched within self-efficacy and achievement goal frameworks. In the area of foreign language learning these essential connections have been almost entirely unexplored, as the field has set itself apart from the essential questions commonly researched within education broadly.

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