



More or less choice? The influence of choice on task motivation and task engagement



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ABSTRACT

The present article reports on two studies which investigated how and to what extent students' intrinsic motivation and task engagement were affected by manipulating autonomy, in the form of task choice. A total of 120 learners of L2 Russian at a German university worked in pairs to complete a task that focused on making a written presentation about a famous contemporary person from Russia. Two types of choice were manipulated: choice on the content of the task and procedural choice. Four different outcomes of students' performances were examined: (a) responses to a questionnaire tapping their subjective experiences regarding task motivation, (b) time-on-task in minutes, (c) total word length of their written presentations, and (d) quality of task performance. Results suggest that different combinations of choice produce different effects on students' behavior. Contrary to the assumptions of self-determination theory (Deci and Ryan, 1985), the conditions with less choice proved to be more beneficial for students' task engagement and task motivation. The findings offer a complex picture regarding the application of self-determination theory in understanding learner motivation during task-based language teaching.

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1. Introduction

Much research has been done on learner individual differences in an attempt to explain variable success in second language (L2) acquisition (Dörnyei, 2005; Pawlak, 2012). Motivation has been identified as one of the “‘big two’ individual difference factors” (Ellis, 2004, p. 531), along with language aptitude, and for researchers as well as teachers motivation is considered to be one of the most important predictors of successful instructed language learning (Dörnyei, 2005). Particularly since Crookes and Schmidt (1991) encouraged an expansion of the L2 motivational research agenda, a number of motivational theories have been applied in investigating motivation in SLA: self-efficacy theory (Bandura, 2001), task-value model (Wigfield & Eccles, 2000), goal-setting theory (Locke & Latham, 2002), action control theory (Heckhausen & Kuhl, 1985), acculturation theory (Schumann, 1986), and possible-selves theory (Markus & Nutrius, 1986), among others. However, one of the most influential approaches in motivational psychology is self-determination, a theory developed by psychologists Deci and Ryan (1985, 2000). It has been applied successfully by SLA researchers to help understand L2 learning motivation in instructional settings (e.g., Noels, 2001; Noels, Clement, & Pelletier, 1999; Noels, Clement, Pelletier & Vallerand, 2000; Tanaka, 2013). Self-determination theory (SDT) is highly relevant to the present study as it is widely considered to be a theory that

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reflects the dynamic dimension of motivation, while acknowledging the significance of motivation for the classroom setting, and both issues have been heralded as particularly important to L2 motivation research (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011).

Recent evolutions in methods of second language instruction, in particular the shift to communicative and task-based language teaching, provide another reason why researching task motivation should be a priority. With more and more teachers organizing language instruction around tasks, it is a logical step to focus on task motivation as the object of the analysis in the L2 motivation research domain. Several studies on L2 motivation (Dörnyei & Kormos, 2000; Dörnyei, 2002; Kormos & Dörnyei, 2004) have shown that students with the same level of initial motivation can have different levels of task motivation, depending on factors such as favorable attitude to the task or the partner's motivation. Analyzing the motivational basis of language learning tasks, Dörnyei (2002) found higher correlations between the task engagement variables with course attitudes and task attitudes, than with more stable trait-like motivational variables. Since sustained task engagement should provide students with more opportunities to interact and thus learn the language, it is important for researchers and teachers to find out if there are any task features that can enhance students' task motivation and as a consequence, language learning.

In spite of the importance of task motivation, only a few studies in the SLA field have investigated it (Ben Maad, 2012; Dembovskaia, 2009; Julkunen, 1989; Ma, 2009; Yanguas, 2011). Furthermore, only one of them, a dissertation study by Ma (2009), investigated task motivation from the SDT perspective. In order to fill this research gap, the present study addressed the recent converging interests in L2 motivation and task-based language teaching research. It investigated task motivation from the self-determination perspective with students of Russian as a foreign language at a German university by manipulating students' levels of autonomy on two aspects of a learning task.

2. Literature review

2.1. Self-determination theory

Self-determination theory was originally developed in the 1980s in mainstream psychology by Deci and Ryan (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Deci and Ryan propose that humans can experience different types of motivation along a continuum: from the least determined motivation (amotivation), which is demonstrated when learners find neither competence nor value in doing actions, to intrinsic motivation, that is, the most self-determined motivation, which is demonstrated when doing something for the inherent satisfaction of the activity itself. Another important motivational type on the continuum is extrinsic motivation, which is demonstrated when the purpose of action is for instrumental outcomes. Extrinsic motivation is further subdivided into three categories depending on the degree of internalization of certain beliefs: external regulation, introjected regulation, and identified regulation. Of these various types, it is intrinsic motivation, the most self-determined type, that has been empirically shown to result in "greater engagement, vitality, and creativity in people's life activities, relationships and projects" (Deci & Ryan, 2012, p. 85). In order to experience self-determined types of motivation, humans need to satisfy three basic psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Satisfaction of these fundamental needs is crucial for their autonomous, that is, self-determined motivation. Social contexts (including learning contexts) that satisfy these needs will enhance intrinsic motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2000). On the other hand, conditions that do not support autonomy, competence, and relatedness, are hypothesized to thwart self-determined motivation.

In the domain of foreign language learning Noels et al. (1999) were the first to research L2 learners' motivation in an instructional environment from the SDT perspective. Investigating teaching styles, they found that students in Canada who perceived their teachers to be autonomy-supportive (less controlling) showed much more intrinsic motivation than students whose teachers tended to be more controlling. Noel and colleagues' special contribution to L2 motivation research was the development of the Language Learning Orientation Scale (Noels, Pelletier, Clement, & Vallerand, 2000), which has been used in several studies on L2 motivation from the SDT perspective. However, it was not until 2009 that SDT was applied to investigate L2 task-specific motivational issues, in a dissertation by Ma (2009). Ma conducted three separate studies with college-level Korean learners of English to investigate whether the manipulations of an oral argumentative task undertaken according to SDT had an influence on students' task motivation, among other variables. She found that it was the participants' task motivation, rather than their trait motivation, that was generally more closely related with their task engagement, task performance quality, and intention to persist in doing the given task. However, the results also indicated that although students in the choice group experienced significantly higher levels of perceived choice, they did not demonstrate increased levels of self-determined task motivation.

Along similar lines, the present study focuses specifically on *autonomy* and investigates task features that can be built into task design by manipulating choice within a task, as well as the relationship with task outcomes.

2.2. Autonomy and choice

Deci and Ryan (1985) defined autonomy as a sense of unpressured willingness to engage in any activity. According to SDT, tasks that provide students with choice enhance their self-determined (i.e., intrinsic) motivation. Conversely, tasks with little choice, externally imposed on students using controlling instructions, may interfere with learners' perceived choice and consequently undermine their intrinsic motivation. Abundant research in psychology on the effects of choice has demonstrated the positive influence of providing choices on effort, task performance, subsequent learning, and perceived

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