



# Motivating young language learners: A longitudinal model of self-determined motivation in elementary school foreign language classes



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## ABSTRACT

Promoting intrinsic motivation is often a central concern in teaching foreign languages to elementary school children. Self-determination theory posits that intrinsic motivation develops through the interaction of the person and the environment. The present study investigated how elementary school students' motivation develops over the course of a school year in Japanese public schools. Five-hundred and fifteen Japanese elementary school children were surveyed over the course of one school year. Self-reported motivation, perceptions of teacher support, need satisfaction, and engagement were measured at different times. External raters observed students' engagement, while classroom teachers assessed the quality of students' motivation and learning. Structural equation modeling results indicated a positive, dynamic relationship between motivation, perceptions of the learning environment, and engagement. External raters' assessments showed significant positive correlations with students' self-reported engagement. Findings indicate how the instruction offered in these Japanese elementary schools supported students' foreign language learning motivation.

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## 1. Introduction

For elementary school children, learning a language can often be a process of growth and discovery. When learners develop positive affect for the foreign language, it can lead to a lifelong interest. Making the process of foreign language learning attractive to children is a goal of many instructional programs (Garton, Copland, & Burns, 2011). In these contexts, motivation, and more specifically intrinsic motivation, becomes a key focus in the classroom process.

Following this trend, the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (MEXT), has emphasized intrinsic motivation (“zest for life”) in its institution of compulsory (English) foreign language studies for all 5th and 6th grade pupils (MEXT, 2008). Under this Course of Study, students experience foreign language communication through interaction and games, but are not given summative assessments due to the potentially damaging motivational consequences (Berwick & Ross, 1989). Instead, teachers nurture motivation through a low-pressure, low-stakes learning environment (Ryan & Niemiec, 2009), based on experiential learning, with no summative assessments and a strong

emphasis on enjoyment (MEXT, 2008). The ultimate goal is to promote motivation through supporting students' behavior, interest, and positive attitude toward the foreign language; in other words, their engagement and intrinsic motivation. This leads to the question of how teachers can effectively support and maintain this type of activity and motive. As noted by Butler (2015, p. 319), situated research on the learning context is now needed to find how best to support and maintain young language learners' motivation. In this study, we address this call for further research.

Previous longitudinal models of motivational development in first and second language educational settings have primarily focused on secondary school children (e.g., Csizér & Dörnyei, 2005; Jang, Kim, & Reeve, 2012). While there have been cross-sectional studies looking at Japanese elementary students' language learning motivation (Carreira, 2011, 2012; etc.), previous studies have not approached this from a latent-variable, structural equation modeling perspective. Due to numerous constraints on the use of testing in elementary foreign language classes, previous models have also not included external assessments. We propose an empirical model of how motivation to learn a foreign language begins to develop in a public elementary school setting, including external assessment of learning outcomes.

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### 1.1. Foreign language motivation in elementary schools

In recent years, researchers have given considerable attention to motivation in elementary schools across East Asia (Butler, 2015). In Japan, the Ministry of Education currently promotes the ideas of interest and motivation in foreign language learning through an emphasis on communication and games in elementary classrooms; the Course of Study specifically refers to promoting interest, behavior, and motivation (MEXT, 2008). Students learn words and phrases through interest-building, activity-based classes, without relying on external rewards such as praise and high-stakes assessment. This paradigm of instruction is consistent with the motivational ideas put forth in *self-determination theory* (SDT; Deci & Ryan, 1985), in that both seek to promote a positive motivational climate for language learning (Oga-Baldwin & Nakata, 2014).

According to SDT, intrinsic motivation is defined as the desire to engage with a task for its own sake, and is often indexed by personal enjoyment, interest, and feelings of positive affect. Applied to language education generally, SDT has shown positive explanatory power for students' desire to continue learning the new language (Noels, Pelletier, Clément, & Vallerand, 2000) and interact with foreign cultures (Noels, Clément, & Pelletier, 2001; Vansteenkiste, Zhou, Lens, & Soenens, 2005).

Applying ideas from SDT in a series of cross-sectional studies in Japanese elementary schools, Carreira (2006, 2011, 2012) found a clear pattern of decreasing motivation to learn English as a foreign language across school years, subjects, and genders. Students' motivation to learn in schools decreased in higher grades, both in terms of the desire to learn English (Carreira, 2006) and the desire to learn other subjects (Carreira, 2011). Male students also showed lower levels of adaptive motivation compared to females. These results are echoed in studies of young learners in Korea (Kim, 2011).

In a recent study, Carreira, Ozaki, and Maeda (2013) found evidence that teachers' support correlated with higher student motivation. Using path analyses, the results of this study suggested that teachers' support predicted a sense of more autonomous motivation for learning a foreign language. While previous work indicated that the quantity of motivation diminishes as students age (Carreira, 2011), this study offered the hope that perhaps through effective pedagogy, teachers could influence the quality of students' motivation.

Similar findings come from studies in China. Parents from higher socio-economic backgrounds supported their children's sense of autonomy and self-determined motivation (Butler, 2014). These higher income parents were also more likely to provide a less-controlling and more nurturing environment for children learning a foreign language. Similarly, teachers in Korea attributed decreases in student motivation to teaching practices (Kim & Seo, 2012). Taken together, these studies indicate that the decreasing trend in motivation noted in previous studies may be a partial product of their environment, potentially remedied by providing better support for students' motivational needs. If this is so, students with positive perceptions of their teachers' support should show a lower decrease in motivation over time.

According to MEXT (2008), classroom teaching should support positive interest in and behavior toward language learning. Continuing in the traditions defined by previous language learning studies (Butler, 2014; Carreira et al., 2013; Nishida, 2013), we integrate self-determination theory and its minitheories with the concept of engagement to describe how elementary school learners develop a sense of positive autonomous motivation.

### 1.2. Self-determination theory and its minitheories

As a broad theory of human motivation across domains, SDT attempts to organize the numerous aspects of motivation,

including how and why people do what they do, the effects of the environment, and personal needs and goals (Deci & Ryan, 1985). According to Reeve (2012), SDT is "a macrotheory of motivation comprised of five interrelated minitheories" (p. 150). The three minitheories relevant to the current study are *organismic integration theory* (OIT), *basic psychological need theory* (BPNT), and *cognitive evaluation theory* (CET) (Ryan, Deci, & Vansteenkiste, 2016). Researchers have tested different combinations of these theories (cf. Carreira et al., 2013; Jang et al., 2012; Noels et al., 2000), but none have used all of them together in an empirical longitudinal model. In this study, we test all three theories alongside the concept of engagement to build a motivational model for foreign language learning.

#### 1.2.1. Reasons why: Regulation of motivation

Self-determination theory posits that learners have a range of motives that can underpin their efforts at learning. This minitheory, called *organismic integration theory* (OIT), describes a set of behavioral regulation patterns, moving from external, controlled reasons to internalized, autonomous reasons. In broad terms, OIT describes why learners choose to engage in their schoolwork on a continuum from controlled to autonomous motivation.

Controlled motivation is comprised of motives whose locus of causality is outside of the person. It is represented by *external* and *introjected regulations*. Under external regulation, students complete tasks in order to get praise, rewards, or avoid negative consequences. Extrinsically regulated behavior disappears quickly after the rewards disappear (Deci, Koestner, & Ryan, 2001). Introjected regulation comes from a sense of "ought-to," shame or other social pressure associated with a task. This form of regulation is brought about by a desire not to seem incapable in the eyes of classmates, or to receive positive regard from parents or teachers. These two categories of maladaptive motivation can be used together (Vansteenkiste, Sierens, Soenens, Luyckx, & Lens, 2009), but also may appear as separate and distinct sets of motives (Carreira, 2012; Noels et al., 2000). Students with more controlled motives generally show less effective time management and greater anxiety (Senécal, Julien, & Guay, 2003), and ultimately lower achievement (Soenens & Vansteenkiste, 2005).

The opposite of controlled motivation, autonomous motivation, is defined by two types of regulation: *identified* and *intrinsic regulation*. Prior studies have measured these two regulations together as autonomous motivation (e.g., Vansteenkiste et al., 2009). Identified regulation refers to how individuals perceive personal value in learning. This presents as a desire to learn for tangible or intangible future gains, such as attaining the skills necessary for a dream job, becoming part of a desired target community, or other instrumental outcome (Noels, 2013). Intrinsic regulation is characterized as a belief that the learning task is stimulating, that accomplishment in and of itself is worthwhile, and that studying and knowing new things is pleasurable (Noels et al., 2000). Autonomously motivated students use more deep-level learning strategies (Vansteenkiste et al., 2005) and achieve better grades (Soenens & Vansteenkiste, 2005).

Studies have replicated the internal to external continuum from autonomous to controlled motivation presented by organismic integration theory to describe motivation for learning a foreign language (Noels et al., 2000). Other research using this aspect of SDT has been conducted in Japanese elementary schools, (Ando, Fuse, & Kodaira, 2008; Carreira, 2012; Oga-Baldwin & Nakata, 2017; Yamauchi & Tanaka, 1998), showing support for the theory. In some of these studies, students' responses indicated a three-factor solution, with identified and introjected regulations factoring together (Ando et al., 2008; Carreira, 2012), while others indicated a four-factor solution (Oga-Baldwin & Nakata, 2017; Yamauchi & Tanaka, 1998). Ando et al. (2008) sample came from

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