



# Classroom social climate, self-determined motivation, willingness to communicate, and achievement: A study of structural relationships in instructed second language settings



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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to integrate three related theoretical frameworks—classroom social climate, self-determination theory (SDT), and L2 willingness to communicate (WTC)—and investigate connections between key individual and situational factors for motivation and L2 achievement in a formal secondary-school setting in Korea ( $N = 381$ ). We propose a model of the impact of the classroom social climate on secondary school L2 learners' self-determined motivation and WTC, before extending our analysis to the effect of these individual and contextual factors on L2 achievement. Structural equation modeling showed that self-determined motivation was predicted by satisfaction of basic psychological needs (i.e., autonomy, competence, and relatedness), which are in turn predicted by positive classroom social climate. WTC was predicted strongly by satisfaction of basic psychological needs, and weakly by perceived competence and identified regulation, but not by intrinsic motivation. L2 achievement was initially predicted significantly by identified regulation and perceived competence, but after controlling for prior achievement only perceived competence remained a significant, but weak ( $\beta = 0.07$ ), predictor. These findings support the notion that context is an empirically relevant frame of reference for the study of individual factors, and highlight the impact a classroom environment exerts on important L2 learning outcomes. However, our findings also underscore the work remaining in the L2 learning field to uncover robust predictors of L2 achievement. We hope this study will stimulate further research into the situated and interrelated nature of motivation, WTC, and achievement that will both consolidate and refine current theoretical and empirical insights.

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## 1. Introduction

One cannot think of successful second or foreign language (L2) development occurring without at least some form of motivation on the part of the learner (Dörnyei & Ryan, 2015). Motivation governs the direction and magnitude of behavioral choices regarding what goals to avoid or pursue (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011), and provides an indication of the quality and quantity of goal-directed effort. As such, the question of how to get and keep learners motivated through the dips and peaks of language development may be a priority of much of L2 instruction. However, the majority of L2 learning worldwide occurs in formal classroom settings involving long hours of intense preparation to succeed in compulsory examinations. Without debating the relative merit of these characteristics, we believe this indicates that learners are presented with little need to use the target language apart from achieving good grades. Thus, while there may be learners whose L2 learning behavior

is driven by externally-regulated motives, the notion of individual volitional action to communicate in the L2—considered one of the most desirable outcomes of learning a second language—is arguably absent from these settings (MacIntyre, 2007).

A longstanding emphasis within this field is a focus on contextual features of the L2 classroom, conditions which are thought to play a key part in initiating and sustaining L2 learning motivation due to the distributed nature (i.e., between people) of engagement and goal-directed behavior in classrooms (Wedell & Malderez, 2013). The notion that classrooms have distinct psychological environments, which may in turn affect individuals' thought and action, has been around for the better part of a century (Greeno, 2015). In the realm of L2 learning and use, this is even more pronounced because of the understanding that learner characteristics, behavior, and development can be influenced by various competing temporal and situational factors (e.g., Batstone, 2010; Kramsch, 2008; Larsen-Freeman, 2015; van Lier, 2004). Integrating various situative and individual constructs or processes offers a way to examine learning and development beyond the individual, thus explaining why “individuals take up practices in

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particular contexts as a function of their ongoing participation in social practices” (Nolen, Horn, & Ward, 2015, p. 235).

In this study we build on recent research showing the importance of a situated perspective of L2 learners' willingness to communicate (e.g., Cao, 2011; Khajavy, Ghonsooly, Hosseini Fatemi, & Choi, 2016; Peng, 2014; Yashima, 2012) to investigate the relationships between individual and situational factors that impact L2 willingness to communicate (WTC) and L2 achievement in a formal classroom setting. Noels (2009) has proposed that self-determination theory (SDT) is a core model for addressing both the individual learner's agency in a formal classroom setting and the social context of language learning. The constructs of SDT and WTC address not only how satisfaction of basic psychological needs (e.g., autonomy, competence, and relatedness) can lead to autonomous forms of motivated behavior in the language classroom, but they are also well-suited to integrating situational factors—such as the classroom social environment—into a combined framework for investigating cognitive choices and behavioral outcomes in L2 instructional settings. Our primary aim in this article, extending work by Deci et al. (2001) which proposes that autonomy support contributes to needs satisfaction and predicts key outcomes, is to capture theoretical and empirical insights in constructing an integrative framework of the structural relationships between these aspects. To do so, we propose a novel model of the impact of the classroom social climate on secondary school L2 learners' self-determined motivation and subsequent influence on WTC, before extending our analysis to the effect of these individual and contextual factors on L2 achievement.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Context and the classroom social climate

A growing body of evidence suggests that the classroom social climate plays a significant role in what actually happens in the process of learning, and the way that the people in the classroom group think and behave (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009; Klem & Connell, 2004). Interpersonal relationships, modes of communication between individuals, and other group processes that exist in the context of a classroom can be seen as part of this classroom social climate (Dörnyei & Murphey, 2003). On an individual-focused level, the way students perceive various aspects of the classroom social environment relates to their self-beliefs, which are associated with the use of adaptive self-regulatory strategies that in turn influence the nature and extent of their engagement and achievement in academic tasks (Patrick, Kaplan, & Ryan, 2011). However, even learners' engagement, conventionally thought of as involving primarily cognitive involvement and affective connections, has begun to be explored in ways which foreground the inherently social nature of educational and intellectual endeavors (Wentzel, 2012). Philp and Duchesne (2016, p. 57) term this outcome “mutuality” or the effort, active participation, and responsiveness that occurs when learners partake in reciprocal social interactions in L2 classroom settings.

Research into the social climate of the classroom posits three complementary constructs (Patrick & Ryan, 2005): teacher academic support, teacher emotional support, and classroom mutual respect. Teacher academic support refers to student perceptions of the teacher helping them to master the learning content rather than encouraging competitiveness between learners; teacher emotional support relates to a student's perceptions of the teacher caring for them as a person and supporting their overall well-being; classroom mutual respect concerns the students' perceptions of their teacher encouraging mutual respect and peer help in classroom interactions (see also Patrick, Ryan, & Kaplan, 2007). The premise of these dimensions of the social climate of a classroom is that the extent to which students sense emotional support from their teacher, feel personally valued and able to contribute through interactions with their peers, and perceive their teacher as being committed to supporting their learning is an important precursor to

students' effort, engagement, and achievement in the classroom (Ryan & Patrick, 2001).

With respect to classroom social climate and L2 learning in particular, research conducted by Noels and colleagues (Noels, 2001; Noels, Clément, & Pelletier, 1999) is noteworthy as their results indicate an important link between students' perceptions that their teachers' instructional style was autonomy-supportive, on the one hand, and positive language learning outcomes on the other. This has also been explored with regard to learners' self-determined motivation (Noels, 2009; Reeve & Jang, 2006) and L2 willingness to communicate (Peng & Woodrow, 2010). More recent research has reported not only that a teacher providing informative feedback about learning progress was associated with increased intrinsic motivation but also, conversely, that the more the students perceived their teachers to be controlling, the lower the students' intrinsic motivation (Jang, Reeve, & Deci, 2010; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2013). Because an optimal social environment is likely to facilitate activities and interactions that promote L2 learners' psychological well-being, we expect the classroom social climate to influence basic psychological needs (i.e., autonomy, competence, and relatedness) that lead to more autonomous forms of motivation. We build on this idea in the next section.

### 2.2. Self-determined motivation and L2 learning

Self-determination theory (SDT) has been described as a comprehensive theory of human motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2000), developed on the premise that when basic psychological needs are satisfied as a function of interpersonal dynamics and social settings human beings naturally develop growth-oriented propensities—namely, internalization and intrinsic motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2012; Noels, 2009). SDT theorists argue that when these basic psychological needs are met humans are able to internalize motivated behaviors—that is, they become self-determined and autonomously initiated (Deci & Ryan, 2002). We, thus, expect the more self-determined types of motivation to be influenced by satisfaction of basic psychological needs in classroom settings as these position learners to engage in more autonomously motivated pursuits (e.g., Carreira, 2012; Jang, Reeve, Ryan, & Kim, 2009).

Extrinsic and intrinsic motivations are thought to exist on a continuum of self-determination (Reeve, 2002). On this continuum, amotivation is the absence of any kind of motivation. Types of extrinsic motivation range from the least self-determined form external-regulation, to introjected-regulation (i.e., when external forces of control have been internalized to some extent), identified-regulation (i.e., when an internalized sense of the personal value of an activity is achieved), and integrated-regulation (i.e., when performing an activity becomes a means of expressing core aspects of one's identity). Although it originates externally, integrated-regulation shares several characteristics with intrinsic motivation, given that it stems from values that are fully congruent with aspects of a learner's self (Deci, Vallerand, Pelletier, & Ryan, 1991). Particularly with beginning adolescent L2 learners, however, this type of regulation is not easily distinguished from identified regulation because the source of motivation originates from outside (Noels, 2001; Pintrich, 2003). Because our sample is adolescent L2 learners, we do not examine integrated regulation, and instead focus on identified regulation and intrinsic motivation in the rest of this article.

While SDT research has demonstrated that both intrinsic and identified self-regulations are associated with successful learning outcomes (Burton, Lydon, D'Alessandro, & Koestner, 2006), the continuum view of self-regulatory styles positions individuals' acceptance of the value and importance of a behavior and its integration into the self (i.e., identified regulation) further away from the autonomous end than individuals freely choosing to perform an activity for its own sake out of an underlying sense of interest and enjoyment (i.e., intrinsic regulation) (Carver & Scheier, 2000). Some scholars have concluded that because identified regulation has stronger associations with investment of effort and persistence, it is key to the successful regulation of behaviors that are highly valued socially but not necessarily fun, and thus a more

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