

1 Research purpose and plan

I conducted my research in the Language Centre (Centro Linguistico di Ateneo) at the University of Padova (Università degli Studi di Padova) in Italy (the center is henceforth referred to as the CLA). I wanted to learn more about a program of conversation groups offered by the CLA, called *Conversazioni CreAttive* in Italian. One purpose of my research was to learn more about the organization and rationale of these groups. I did this through informal discussions and interviews with CLA learning advisors, including the learning advisor in charge of the *Conversazioni CreAttive* program. The other purpose of my research was to interview some student participants in the English-language conversation group because I was interested in finding out what motivated these students to continue developing their English skills outside the classroom. The three students I interviewed were not studying English or language but had nevertheless enrolled in the English conversation groups to improve their spoken English. My purpose was to see what motivated these students to enroll in these conversation groups. In addition, I wanted to find out how these students' experiences in the conversation groups had affected them. My research questions (RQs) for this part of my research were:

1 What motivated these students to continue working on their English language skills outside the classroom context when there was no requirement for them to do so?

2 How did the conversation groups meet these students' basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness?

My theoretical framework for my two RQs in the second part of my research was primarily Self-Determination Theory (SDT). In addition, for RQ 1, I also employed as an alternative theoretical framework the Self-regulation of Motivation (SRM) model.

There were three stages in my research plan: a preparatory stage; data collection stage; and data analysis stage. The preparatory stage involved learning about the language courses and activities offered by the CLA, as well as the CLA's role within the university, through meetings and interviews with CLA learning advisors. Also during this preparatory stage, I reviewed the relevant areas of literature for my research. Towards the end of the preparatory stage, I attended a planning meeting for the coming semester's conversation groups, at which I met volunteer student moderators who would lead the conversation groups. To wrap up the preparatory stage of my research, I also interviewed the moderator of one of the English conversation groups and arranged a schedule for meeting that group and arranging interviews with some of the group members. For the data collection stage of my research I conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews with three students, which were recorded with the participants' permission. In the final, data analysis, stage I analyzed the interviews from the perspective of the theoretical frameworks mentioned above.

2 Research activities

As I explained in the previous section, one purpose of my research was to learn about the conversation groups run by the CLA by talking with organizers and participants. I had a number of informal meetings with learning advisors and teachers in the CLA over the first few months of my research period. In addition, I also had a more structured group interview/meeting with the CLA's three learning advisors to gather background information about the CLA, its students, and the conversation groups.

The CLA provides language support for University of Padova students doing a range of non-language degree programs. For example, it offers language courses in Italian, English, French, Spanish, German, and Russian. These courses are for students who are not language majors. For example, a number of undergraduate and graduate degree programs are taught in English, such as Psychology, Engineering (undergraduate), Data Science, Physics, Business Administration (Master's), Astronomy, Geosciences, and Biomedical Sciences (Doctorate). To take undergraduate and graduate programs taught in English, a B2 CEFR (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages) level in English is required. Students participate in the CLA's language courses to reach and maintain their required level.

The CLA, in addition to its language courses, provides support for self-directed study to help students reach the required level. In addition to language advising and tandem programs, the CLA offers a program called *Conversazioni CreActive*, which are conversation groups for different languages—English, Italian, French, Spanish, German, and Russian. This initiative was started in 2006, and in its current format has been running since 2018. The program is free and open to all University of Padova students. Conversation group sessions of 90 minutes are held once a week for five weeks each semester. Each conversation group is run by a student moderator who is a native speaker of the target language.

As well as providing language support, an important rationale of the conversation groups is to encourage more autonomous behaviour among students. Although the *Conversazioni CreActive* program is organized by learning advisors, once the conversation group sessions start, they are run by and for students. Students have the opportunity to choose their own topics to talk about. Student participants and moderators complete feedback forms at the end of each semester, and feedback from both moderators and participants over the past few years has been overwhelmingly positive. Some students have participated as group members and moderators in different years. From the meetings that I attended with learning advisors and moderators, I learned that the groups attract a mix of Italian and international students, many of whom are keen to not only improve their speaking skills, but also to get to know new people and learn about the culture of the target language.

As mentioned in the previous section, during the preparatory stage of my research, I also conducted literature reviews in the fields of Self-Determination Theory (SDT) and the Self-Regulation of Motivation (SRM) model. My most extensive review was of the SDT literature, as this was the primary theoretical framework I adopted. SDT consists of six mini-theories, three of which were directly relevant to my research. Two of these mini-theories related to my first research question (RQ 1): Cognitive Evaluation Theory (CET) concerns intrinsic motivation (doing something for its own sake); Organismic Integration Theory (OIT) concerns extrinsic motivation (doing something for instrumental reasons) in its different forms. A person who is intrinsically motivated is acting more autonomously than someone who is extrinsically motivated.

However, extrinsic motivation can exhibit different degrees of what is known as internalization. The more internalized a person's extrinsic motivation is, the more autonomous that person's behaviour is compared to someone with a less internalized form of extrinsic motivation. A third mini-theory, Basic Psychological Needs Theory (BPNT), relates to RQ 2. BPNT deals with evolved psychological needs that are crucial for well-being. In BPNT, there are three basic psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Autonomy means having the experience of willingness and volition; competence is to do with having a sense of mastery and effectiveness; and, finally, relatedness refers to the feeling of forming connections and bonds with others. In BPNT, the satisfaction of these three psychological needs is essential for an individual's wellbeing, while the frustration of these needs has detrimental effects. Furthermore, there is a relationship between basic psychological needs and motivation: autonomy and competence support are seen as fostering intrinsic motivation while autonomy and relatedness support are seen as critical to the internalization of extrinsic motivation.

As mentioned above, I also reviewed the literature on the SRM model. This model of motivation proposes that, to sustain long-term engagement with learning, learners have to balance two types of motivation—the motivation to achieve goals (goals-defined motivation) and the motivation that derives from interest (experience-defined motivation). Goals-defined and experience-defined motivation are integrated in the SRM model, and both kinds of motivation are seen as working in complementary or opposing ways.

My literature review of these two theories informed my interview design and analysis. I created my interview questions to encourage the interviewees to talk about the types of motivation that drove them to join the conversation group and to reflect on their experiences in the group. My interviews were semi-structured, following a list of topics I wanted to cover while at the same time allowing the interviewees the freedom to talk about what they considered relevant.

Before conducting the interviews, I visited one of the English conversation groups to explain my research and ask for volunteers to wish to participate. I arranged interviews with three students from that conversation group. All three were postgraduate students; one was doing a doctoral degree while the other two were enrolled on master's degrees. Two of the students were Italian, and the third was an international student.

Student A was in the second year of her master's degree at the University of Padova, studying electrical engineering. Her undergraduate degree had also been in engineering. Student B was also doing her master's degree, in developmental psychology. She had completed two years of courses and was working on her final thesis. Student C was an international student studying for her doctorate in the field of sustainable agriculture.

The interviews were recorded and transcribed. I analyzed the transcripts by grouping interviewee quotations into main categories: motivation for learning English before university; motivation for learning English while at university; and experiences in the conversation groups. I further analyzed the participants' quotations within the theoretical frameworks of SDT and the SRM model.

3 Research results

After analyzing the interview transcripts, I drew up profiles for the three students, focusing on their motivation and their conversation group experiences:

Student A

Intrinsic motivation

This student maintains a desire to maintain their English skills despite not having formal opportunities to study. Evidence of intrinsic motivation comes from this student's interest in being able to communicate with people from different parts of the world, which seems to have been a major impetus in pushing them to join a conversation group.

Extrinsic motivation

This student talked of their motivation to pass exams in school and potentially study abroad for their thesis. This can be classified clearly as externally regulated extrinsic motivation in that the student recognizes the importance of English for academic success and career opportunities, which is an external incentive for their language learning. There are also indications of introjected regulation in their motivation when they mention feeling more motivated now because they realize they need to maintain their English skills, possibly to improve their job chances after graduation. The pressure they feel from their perceived lack of practice over the past few years could be driving this more internalized form of extrinsic motivation. Student A's decision to attend conversation groups and potentially study abroad for their thesis demonstrates identified regulation. They recognize that these activities are beneficial for improving their English proficiency and enhancing their academic or career prospects, indicating a somewhat internalized sense of the value of these actions.

Overall, this student's motivation for learning English appears to be a combination of both intrinsic and extrinsic factors, with varying degrees of internalization. Their motivation is driven by the perceived importance of English in both academic and professional contexts, as well as the desire for intercultural communication. However, they also face challenges such as limited opportunities for practice and fluctuations in motivation over time.

Goals-defined/Experience-defined motivation

Overall, this student's motivation tends to be goal-driven. They know English is useful and want to make the most of the opportunities it provides. Their goals are associated with academic and future professional life.

Satisfaction of BPNs

Autonomy

The student did not indicate in the interview that the conversation group was supportive of their sense of autonomy, but the fact that, despite feeling insecure initially, they took the initiative to join a voluntary conversation group to address their weakness in speaking English, suggests a need for autonomy in choosing their learning methods and taking control of their language learning process.

Competence

Initially, the student felt unsure about their English proficiency and lacked confidence due to years of limited practice. However, participating in the conversation group helped boost their confidence. They mentioned remembering terms from listening to other students and feeling more competent in colloquial English. Therefore, there is evidence that the conversation group was a supportive environment for satisfying their need to feel competent.

Relatedness

Joining the conversation group provided this student with a sense of relatedness and connection with others. They enjoyed the relaxed atmosphere and felt comfortable interacting with both non-Italian and Italian speakers of English. Engaging in conversations about various topics, including holidays, friendship, and food, facilitated connections and fostered a supportive environment within the group. This sense of relatedness likely contributed to Student A's enjoyment of the experience and their willingness to participate further.

Student B

Intrinsic motivation

This student's intrinsic motivation for learning English appears to be very high. They express a genuine interest in consuming media, such as films, social media content, and fan fiction, in English, which drives them to improve their English proficiency. Their motivation stems from personal enjoyment and curiosity rather than external pressures.

Extrinsic motivation

While the student's motivation is primarily intrinsic, there are some elements of external regulation. For example, they mention the practical necessity of understanding English to access certain media content, especially when Italian subtitles are unavailable. However, this external pressure seems to be secondary to their intrinsic motivation for consuming English-language media.

Overall, this student's motivation for learning English appears to be primarily intrinsic, driven by their genuine interest in consuming English-language media and their recognition of its positive impact on their language skills. Their proactive approach to language learning, coupled with their enjoyment of English media, suggests a strong and sustained commitment to improving their English proficiency.

Goals-defined/Experience-defined motivation

Student B demonstrates strong experience-defined motivation, finding enjoyment and fulfillment in various language-related activities. Their motivation is fueled by the positive experiences they have had in these activities, which have contributed to their overall interest and engagement in learning English.

Satisfaction of BPNs

Autonomy

The student expresses a lack of opportunities to speak English in their everyday life, indicating a desire for autonomy in their language learning. Joining the conversation group provided them with the opportunity to practice speaking English, which they otherwise wouldn't have had.

Competence

Despite not considering themselves at a "super level" in English, the student acknowledges the importance of being understood during conversations. They express a willingness to make errors and focus more on gaining confidence rather than achieving perfection in grammar. This reflects a need for competence in language communication, where the focus is on effective communication rather than flawless language output. Student B suggested that their experience in the conversation group helped them in this regard.

Relatedness

Participating in the conversation group allowed the student to interact with others and engage in meaningful conversations about topics like travel. They appreciated the opportunity to connect with people they didn't know and share experiences. The positive interactions with fellow participants contributed to a sense of relatedness and made the experience enjoyable. This highlights the importance of social connections and shared experiences in fulfilling the need for relatedness in language learning contexts.

Student C

Intrinsic motivation

Student C's intrinsic motivation for learning English seems to be quite high. They express a personal interest in improving their language skills, which they pursued through their high school years and continued throughout their adult life. Their motivation seems to stem from a desire for self-improvement and personal growth rather than solely external factors like exams or job opportunities.

Extrinsic motivation

The student's motivation to learn English is also influenced by external factors such as the requirements for immigration to Italy and academic exams like IELTS. They mention taking the IELTS exam to fulfill immigration criteria for moving to Italy, indicating a strong external incentive for language learning. Their extrinsic motivation is not solely externally regulated, however. The student demonstrates identified regulation in their commitment to learning English even while working and studying in their home country. They have always recognized the practical importance of English for communication and academic pursuits, which motivates them to continue their language studies despite challenges.

Student C's motivation for learning English appears to be a combination of intrinsic and extrinsic factors, with a strong emphasis on personal growth and practical necessity. They demonstrate a persistent effort to enhance their language skills despite external barriers, driven by a genuine interest in self-improvement and a recognition of the importance of English for their academic and professional aspirations.

Goals-defined/Experience-defined motivation

Student C's motivation is a mix of goals-defined and experience-defined. While having clear goals throughout their language-learning journey, they also place huge importance on communication and social connections, and this interest has been a strong driving force in helping them maintain their motivation.

Satisfaction of BPNs

Autonomy

The student expresses a need for social connection and communication due to their isolated living situation. They mention living far from Padua and spending most of their time alone, which indicates a desire for autonomy in seeking out opportunities for social interaction. Joining the conversation group and Italian language classes provided them with a means to fulfill this need for autonomy by actively engaging with others and participating in group activities.

Competence

The student acknowledges the positive impact of the Italian language classes and conversation group on their language proficiency and communication skills. They especially appreciated the support and guidance from their conversation group student moderators. The conversation group experience seems to have satisfied this student's need for competence in language learning and communication because they could actively engage with others and receive support to enhance their skills.

Relatedness

Participating in the conversation group allowed the student to connect with people from diverse cultural backgrounds. They enjoyed asking questions about their peers' cultures, food, and travel experiences, highlighting the importance of shared experiences and cultural exchange in fulfilling the need for relatedness. The positive interactions and enjoyable conversations within the group fostered a sense of connection.

4 Conclusions

The importance of self-directed second-language learning lies in the fact that it empowers learners to take ownership of their individual language-learning trajectories. One key characteristic of self-directed learners is their ability to regulate their motivation and behaviour. This self-regulation is crucial in a world where learners have access to a vast range of resources in the target language yet face the challenge of selecting resources, activities, and methods of learning that are likely to help them sustain their motivation and, consequently, continue to engage in effective language-learning behaviours. By taking responsibility for their learning, individuals are more likely to overcome challenges and persist in their language learning endeavors. Ultimately, successful self-directed language learning promotes lifelong learning habits.

Most language-learning opportunities come outside the language-learning classroom, and this reality will become even more pronounced with the rapid development of language-education technologies. As language educators, we need to provide opportunities beyond the classroom for learners to practise and develop their language skills and to build social connections with other

learners. This social aspect is key in self-directed learning as it can help provide a supportive context for individuals' needs for autonomy, a sense of competence, and a feeling of relatedness. Initiatives such as the conversation groups described in this study, are vital in providing such a supportive environment.