



# The Role of Intrinsic Motivation in German Language Learning

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## *Abstract*

The purpose of learning any language derives from the necessities and what is wanted of the language. Self-Determination Theory has been a discussed topic to address the learning purpose. The motivational orientation that German learners can take to direct their learning is vital to identify if intrinsic motivation takes place on it. This project is directed as a case study. The mediation of the case study is through an inquiry tool. A written interview is applied in an online modality to collect and discuss the results. In this study is found that the effects that two German learners had during their language learning process were significant to the main reason why they started studying the language. Furthermore, the findings suggest that the different types of intrinsic motivation with the presence of different motivational orientations lead learners to achieve a similar positive effect in their learning that helped learners to maintain it.

*Keywords:* intrinsic motivation, self-determination theory, motivational orientations.

## 1. Introduction

Motivation is one of the complex parts that involve language learning processes. In motivation, there are several factors that can modify the way of perceiving motivation (Rahman, 2017). However, this paper will be addressing the factor of motivational orientation that German learners chose for learning this language and what were the effects that these motivations and determinations produce on them. First, I will provide a brief discussion of what intrinsic motivation is within language learning and its types. In addition, I will explain the driven theory of motivations called Self-Determination (SDT). Furthermore, motivational orientation and its types will be defined. Second, I will provide the methodology that this case study carried out.

## 2. Literature review

The following section will address the theoretical framework for this project. The addressed information will have a crucial role in relating it to the case study.

### 2.1 *Intrinsic motivation*

Intrinsic motivation is the self-agreement of motivation where the learner is free to choose activities to achieve a goal because for her/him it seems interesting (O'Reilly, 2014). Furthermore, intrinsic motivation is described as the enjoyment while doing a task, in this case, learning languages (Spinath & Steinmayr, 2012).

Within intrinsic motivation exists three types of it: knowledge, accomplishment, and stimulation motivation (Vallerand et al., 1992). Knowledge is related to variables such as curiosity, exploration, and learning goals. Learners with this type of motivation are learning the language because they want to learn and know something new. This type of motivation produces pleasure for acquire new knowledge and new ideas (Junko, 2005). Accomplishment motivation is when the learner is engaged with the task because they like the feeling of accomplishing and creating. This type of motivation takes care of the feeling that learners have when they realize they are masters in knowledge, actions, and ideas (Junko, 2005). Finally, stimulation is perceived when the learner does a task due to the emotions and stimulus that he or she feels. This type of motivation takes care of the sensory stimulus that produces the activity in the learners (Junko, 2005). This information has a critique in distinction to the opposite type of intrinsic motivation: extrinsic. Exists a perspective where one of the types of extrinsic motivation called integrated regulation is defined as the wanting to learn the language. The line between these perceptions of motivation is difficult to identify in learners with intrinsic motivation (Oakes & Howard, 2022).

### 2.2 *Self-determination theory*

Self-Determination theory was proposed by Deci and Ryan (2002). This theory works on the understanding of the individual's progress in doing an activity with purpose. They stated that the learner has three needs in the determination of doing the task: the feeling of competency, the feeling of relatedness, and perceived autonomy support. If the monitor identifies the three needs, it can recognize the level and the orientation of motivation that the learner has (O'Reilly, 2014).

Self-Determination theory (SDT) is stated as “*the main idea underlying this theory is the distinction between (1) motivated and intentional behavior and (2) the two types of intentional behavior (self-determined and controlled)*” (Kreishan & Al-Dhaimat., 2013). This information refers to the differences that exist between the purposes that each learner has in learning a language. Exists a difference when a learner is learning a language because it is their own decision and own reasons for studying the language, such as the satisfaction of learning something new. On the other hand, exists a difference when a learner is learning the language because is controlled by external factors, such as belonging to a community. This last idea leads to a concept called “integrative orientation” that will be defined in the next section. However, the idea of belonging in a community starts when a self-determinant is considered. This study will take place on the self-determinants that each participant adopted in their language learning.

Another important idea that Self-Determination theory addresses is that this theory is crucial to the lives of all humans. It is exposed that humans since we were born are curious and developers of creativity with new things. This behavior comes from an own decision that converts to intrinsic behavior (Muñoz & Ramirez, 2015).

### 2.3 *Motivational orientation*

Motivational orientations are the objectives, goals, and competencies that learners want to achieve with the language, and how they achieve those objectives (Kreishan & Al-Dhaimat, 2013). Orientations are the deepest reasons why the learner is learning the language (Khalid,

2016). In addition, exists two types of orientations: integrative and instrumental. The former is related to learning the target language to achieve most parts of the communication system to belong to a community (Khalid, 2016). Furthermore, according to Bakar et al (2010), integrative orientation focuses on the positive attitudes that the learner has toward the social and cultural society that he or she wants to belong to. In addition, Noels et al. (2003) stated that this type of motivation has the purpose of learning a target language to achieve a goal that will be practical. The latter has the purpose to learn the language for essential uses such as job opportunities (Khalid, 2016). However, there is a problem stated by Bakar (2010) where any of the two orientations is enough to prove that learners need only one type of orientation to achieve learning a language. There are several reasons why learners decide to learn a language.

It is important to consider motivational orientations as an advantage to perceive intrinsic motivation in learners because they are the ones that select what knowledge with what activities are selected to learn the language (Bakar, 2010). Another advantage proposed by the same author is the selection of strategies to achieve the goal of learning a language.

### 3. Methodology

In this study, I explored the effects that intrinsic motivation produces in two German learners. In this section, I provided the research questions that conducted the study. Then, I explained the qualitative approach that this study carried. Also, I presented the case study that I explored. Finally, I justify the selection of the tool that I used to explain the study. The type of data that I recollected was qualitative.

#### 3.1 *Research question*

I based my aim of the study on the following question:

1. What effects does Intrinsic motivation have on a pair of German learners in central Mexico?

#### 3.2 *Qualitative approach*

According to Hollstein (2011), the qualitative approach is based on the meaning and understanding of a specific action. The author explained that the qualitative approach provides actions and based on these actions the meaning, interpretation, and understanding are inferred. That is why is considered qualitative data. In my study, I designed a question where I could observe written utterances that provided me with meaning. I looked for the effects of those actions that the participants provided me. According to Choy (2014), a qualitative approach focused on the collection of data with open-ended, semi-structured interviews. The author also stated that the open-ended questions allow the participant expresses what cares for them. In this study, I designed an open-ended interview because I wanted to reflect on the participants' experiences. Also, the open-ended interview leads to new information to interpret that is not within the purpose of the study. This can be observed in the different responses that I could collect with the experiences of the learners.

#### 3.3 *Case study*

Zonabend (1992) stated that case studies aim to focus attention on actions such as observation and the analysis of a special case. Not only seeing what happens in the case but also providing and analyzing the perspective of the participants involved in the case (as cited in Tellis,

1997). Furthermore, Gerring (2004) expressed that a case study is an intensive study that focuses only on one issue, and the issue is understood with other related issues. The study that I addressed was considered a case study due that the focus on collecting data was on the participant-interview method. Also, this study explored one single issue which was found to “effects” intrinsic motivation. Furthermore, to consider the overview of the participant, they were required to answer questions about where feelings and emotions were able to recognize and how the participants were able to deal with and solve these emotions. Finally, the study implemented recollection of evidence that completed the perspective and the development of the learning in the issue of effects on intrinsic motivation.

### *3.4 Context and participants*

The participants that were selected for the study are two women 25 and 28 years. The similar characteristics that the two participants have are they are Mexican; They live in Guanajuato city; they learn English as their second language; they started learning German as their third language; they learned German in the same language course in Mexico; they coursed the classes with the same teacher for one semester, and they learned German because their personal interests. They were required to answer five questions in an online interview. Furthermore, they were asked to share evidence such as photos and documents that could prove the answers of the interview and to link both participants’ experiences.

### *3.5 Inquiry tools (interviews)*

According to Fontana and Frey in 2005, an interview is an event where two or more individuals share data from their own perspectives. The interview is done by an interviewer who is the driver of the questions and points to talk about. The interviewee is the one who responds to the required information. I addressed the study with an online/written interview and with the collection of evidence to relate the theoretical information to the case. I designed the interview to obtain the information that my research questions addressed. I used interviews because the information that I wanted to reflect on was based on the experiences of German students. The procedure that was used to apply the interview was the following: I contacted the participants on WhatsApp. I explained that the interview should be answered with experiences, feelings, and thoughts; there is no limit to words. Then, I sent the interview in a Word Document in the order they can answer the interview there. When they finished the interview, they sent me again the document. The interviews were directed in Spanish. However, for the purpose of this study and the language setting on this, I translated the complete interview into English.

For the second collection, I asked the participants to send me evidence such as photos, screenshots, and chats via WhatsApp. The design of the interview was developed in a way that I related the answers to the evidence to identify what effects have on Intrinsic motivation in them. Also, as it was the same process of learning (activities, exams, tasks) it helped to link both experiences of language activities in the study.

## *4. Analysis and discussion of results*

In the following section, it will be presented the data that was collected by one interview for both participants. This section contains a detailed discussion of the data analysis results. The discussion will take place according to the heading topics: Intrinsic motivation, Self-Determination theory, and Motivational orientations.

#### 4.1 Intrinsic motivation discussion

The findings of this study showed that both participants had intrinsic motivation in their language learning. The question that directed this section is number one. The participant was required to express the reasons why they decided to study German. It can be observed in question number one where participant 1 expressed *“I decided to study German because I like being in constant learning, and languages are part of it. I was influenced by history and music, so, I decided to enroll in and study the language”*<sup>1</sup>. In the first question, it is observed that participant 1 decided to learn German because of her own interests. She likes learning languages. However, one of the main aspects that influenced her to study this specific language was the music and the history. With this response, it is inferred that participant 1 has intrinsic motivation in this learning process. In the case participant 2, she expressed *“I had a planned trip in August, and I wanted to be able to communicate in a basic way”*. This reason for learning the language allows me to link the definition of intrinsic motivation in learning the language. Also, she responded with two specific goals such as to belong to a concrete area in the place she works and to be able to communicate on a trip in August. In addition to this discussion, the type of intrinsic motivation called “knowledge” can be observed in the answer to question one in participant 1 (Junko, 2005). Also, as it was discussed in the Self-Determination theory section, the idea of belonging in a community is an essential aspect that SDT takes into consideration when a learner set a practical determinant (Kreishan & Al-Dhaimat, 2013). She stated, *“I like being in constant learning”* and clearly it identified the learning goals, curiosity, and exploration of the language. Furthermore, the accomplishment motivation is perceived in question one in participant 2 where she declared *“I wanted to be able to communicate in a basic way”*. This answer allows observing the mastery of knowledge that she wanted to achieve (Junko, 2005). In conclusion with the intrinsic motivation section, it may be observed in fragments of the interview where each participant had a different reason why to study the language. However, on these reasons can be interpreted from a perspective where personal goals are set with a specific purpose.

#### 4.2 Self-determination discussion

This discussion takes place on the heading topic of Self-Determination theory. The finding where the needs of the theory were identified is in question number one in participant 2 where she exposed *“The company where I work is from Germany. The fact that I study the language will make that I get an interchange between areas”*. The feeling of competency is identified in this participant due to her context. It is interpreted that the company where she works is looking for these kinds of opportunities where the workers belong to this community provoking their competency feeling on them. The next feeling called relatedness is identified in participant 1 in question one where she expressed *“I was influenced by history and music, so, I decided to enroll in and study the language”*. This feeling of belonging is due to external and personal factors that provoke motivation in the language. The feeling of relatedness also can be localized inside the classroom activities where in question two, both participants agree that writing activities that involve topics such as family and friends help them to learn and develop the language closer to their own context. *“I realized that I was learning more about performing the writing activities about family or friends”* (Participant 1). While participant 2 exposed *“With the writing activities, I refer to the descriptions that we made of things or situations.”* These answers are considered in the part where the Self-Determination Theory looks for the idea of belonging to communities. Even if the context of family or friends is already set in the learner, was necessary to link the language learning goals to their personal lives (Kreishan & Al-Dhaimat, 2013). The next need of Self-Determination theory is called Autonomy which is supported by participant 1 in question

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<sup>1</sup> The original interview was conducted in Spanish. For this study, the translation of the complete interview was done by the author.

number three. She expressed *“I always studied on my own.”* Question number three was designed to observe the autonomous learning that the learner had outside the classroom. This answer belongs to the assignments that she had to study externally to the class, however, question number four can be identified as a similar answer to solving the problems that she has with the language system. *“I think that pronunciation in some words was kind of hard on me. To move on, I was studying, listening, and repeating the words or phrases,”* this answer constructs the idea of autonomy learning. Furthermore, autonomy support can be localized when she stated, *“I took any opportunity to repass the notes or the book that was bought at that moment.”* The idea of using extra material makes a more complete learning process and makes a more meaningful practice of the language. The same point is identified in participant 2 where she stated, *“The way that I study for the exams repassing all the topics that I have been seen during the course, I did again the exercises and I studied as much necessary time as I need”* and *“The way to carry on this situation was by studying the files that the teacher provided us.”*. These answers show that she developed autonomy in learning outside the classroom. Also, the support that she considered was the material that was provided in class, making use of it in an autonomous way (O’Reilly, 2014).

#### 4.3 Motivational orientations

The finding for third section is found mostly in participant 2. As it has been observed, question one involves the identification of intrinsic motivation in both participants. In this case, motivational orientation stated the two main orientations that any learner can adopt to learn the language. The first orientation is called Integrative, and it can be found in participant 2 question one *“I had a planned trip in August, and I wanted to be able to communicate in a basic way.”* The sense of community is presented in this answer. Participant 1 focused her learning with the specific goal of learning the language to be able to communicate. Feeling part, and understanding the context was crucial for her. The other type of orientation is called Instrumental, it is viewed by the same participant when she has the opportunity that she had with the company where she works. Being part of a community but with the job’s perspective is crucial for the professional environment that each learner has (Khalid, 2016).

This study implies what effects intrinsic motivation has on German learners. It notes that the effects are the following considering both experiences and relating them: First if the learner considers intrinsic motivation based on contexts such as belonging to a community, being able to communicate, or identifying with the culture is notable that writing tasks helped them to learn and practice the language. Furthermore, the writing work about topics such as friends, family, or places had a useful purpose for each participant to locate themselves in the language activity. A second effect considering intrinsic motivation in learning German is that participants were able to carry on an autonomous way of learning when required to achieve a passing grade. They were able to make use of material provided in class such as the writing previously discussed. Also, some topics such as grammar and vocabulary pronunciation were the most challenging for them, and to solve this they made use of the book and their own notes to achieve proficiency and unconscious autonomy learning. Finally, an effective effect was localized in each participant in the last question of the interview. The last question addressed the dealing of errors for part of the participants. However, the question also focused on the purpose to remember the reason they were studying the language. Participant 1 expressed *“Currently, because of time, I could not assist to German classes. I am still learning on my own, it is not the same, but it helps to not forget my knowledge.”* It can be observed that the situation of participant 1 does not affect her objective of the language. While participant 2 expressed *“I arrived at the conclusion that I should be relaxed because studying German was a choice and my own merit. The outcomes did not define me.”* She stated that even if something turned difficult, she was studying the language because it was a merit and a personal decision. It can be inferred that Participant 2 took the errors as an opportunity to improve and recognize that learning German is not a requirement that she had to do in order to

define a “good” or “bad” learner. The effects that intrinsic motivation had on both participants were positive. Their motivational orientations helped them to hold the motivation during and after the language learning process.

## 5. Conclusions

It may be concluded that this study exposes the positive effects that two German participants emitted. They were able to identify their own orientations and purposes for learning German. And it was proved that these determinants helped to support their own learning. Furthermore, it can be concluded that intrinsic motivation leads to a series of internal processes of the learner such as their own reflection and actions that allow more positive results of their learning. It was found that intrinsic motivation provokes feelings of acceptance, improvement, determination, autonomy, and responsibility. And the participants were able to make these feelings and situations within the language learning process as skills.

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