A Perceptual Perspective of the Impact of Motivation on Learning Arabic as a Second Language in Light of Self-Determination Theory

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Abstract

In light of Self-determination theory (SDT) (Benson and Voller, 2014; Oga-Baldwin and Nakata, 2017), this study seeks to provide further evidence that highlights the impact of motivation on language learning. According to SDT (Ryan and Deci, 2000b), motivation is shaped by three innate psychological needs: competence, autonomy and relatedness. This paper reports on a direct questionnaire examining students’ attitudes towards the effect of these needs on language learning. One hundred and ten participants took part in the study, all of them are native speakers of English learning Arabic, French, Spanish, or Japanese. As this is a direct questionnaire, students from each group were asked to respond to fifteen questions, five questions for each psychological need. The results of the study reinforce the perceived weight of the three innate psychological needs. Though the three needs received high evaluations, sense of belonging outranked competence and autonomy. The contribution of this study is twofold: theoretical and pedagogical. At the theoretical level, while it has been argued that the impact of motivation is an objective phenomenon, this study shows that respondents are aware of the impact of motivation on learning which adds some subjectivity to this field of inquiry. At the pedagogical level, this paper discusses better ways to create welcoming classroom environments.

Keywords: Arabic, self-determination theory, motivation, psychological needs, autonomy, competence, and sense of belonging.
1 Introduction

As it has been discussed by many scholars, SLA takes place in a social context which influences the learning process (Doughty & Long 2008, 4). In light of self-determination theory (SDT), a theory of human motivation and personality that focuses on people’s inherent growth tendencies and innate psychological needs, this paper examines how social and intrinsic factors related to the learners themselves impact second language learning in particular and learning in general. For SDT, the social context plays an important role in shaping our behavior and attitudes. In other words, social contexts that may support the psychological needs are likely “to promote effective functioning and integrated development”, while social contexts that may “thwart need satisfaction are predicted to diminish effective functioning” (Ryan and Deci, 2000b, p. 12). SDT is primarily concerned with the impact of “social-contextual factors” which may either support or block “people’s thriving through the satisfaction of their basic psychological needs.” (Ryan and Deci, 2017, p. 3). Satisfying these needs is “associated with greater creativity, superior learning, better performance, enhanced well-being, and higher quality relationships” (Ryan and Deci, 2000b).

Research using SDT, as discussed by Ryan and Deci (2000b), listed three innate psychological needs that shape self-motivation: autonomy (Charms, 1968; Deci, 1975), competence (Harter, 1978; White, 1963; White 1963), and sense of belonging or relatedness (Baumeister and Leary, 1995; Reis, 1994). Autonomy is defined as a desire to act with a choice, volition and psychological freedom (Deci and Ryan, 2000). It is the ability to “self-regulate one’s experiences and actions” and to feel that “one’s behaviors are self-endorsed, or congruent with one’s authentic interests and values” (Deci and Ryan, 2000, p. 10). As to Competence, it refers to the desire to be capable of controlling the environment and reaching desired outcomes (Ryan and Deci, 2000b; White, 1959), it also refers to “our basic need to feel effectance and mastery” (Ryan and Deci, 2017, p. 11). Competence can be thwarted when students receive negative feedback or face-threatening comments. Relatedness or sense of belonging can be understood as the inherent propensity to feel a member of a group, to love and be loved and to care and be cared for (Baumeister and Leary, 1995; Deci and Ryan, 2000). The need for relatedness is satisfied “if people experience a sense of communion and maintain close and intimate relationships” with each other (Van den Broeck et al., 2013, p. 14). The need for relatedness is also satisfied when one feels “connected to close others” and that one is “a significant member of social groups” (Ryan and Deci, 2017, p. 11). These needs are considered to be “universally essential for optimal human functioning” (Ryan and Deci, 2017).

It is important to note that the three psychological needs may require different types of support. While support for autonomy may require “affordances of choice and encouragement of self-regulation”, competence supports require “provisions of structure and positive informational feedback”. As to support for relatedness, it requires “the caring involvement of others” (Ryan and Deci, 2017, p. 12). These three innate psychological needs for SDT are considered key elements in motivation which serves as the base for the “analysis of the relation of self-determination to development, behavior, performance, and well-being” (Ryan and Deci, 2017, p. 1). By motivation, SDT refers to what moves people to action. As discussed in () motivation has implications on parenting, school policies, workplace, and sports. In terms of workplace, SDT research has shown that some managerial styles may “engender alienation and apathy whereas others lead to committed and energized employees” (Deci, Olafsen, and Ryan, 2017, stated in Ryan and Deci, 2017, p. 17). As far as sports is concerned, research within SDT show that though athletes rely heavily on intrinsic motivation (Frederick & Ryan 1995), there is always room for coaching climates which may greatly impact performance (Hagger and Chatzisarantis, 2007).

The focus of this paper is on one type of motivation which is referred to as academic motivation (Payne, Rocks, and Schaffner, 2014). Academic motivation is seen as a psychological concept in education...
and is connected to curiosity, persistence, learning, and performance (Vallerand et al., 1993). Though academic motivation has been proven to play an important role in education in light of longitudinal studies (Benson and Voller, 2014; Woodrow, 2017; Thompson, 2017; Oga-Baldwin and Nakata, 2017), only a few studies examined academic motivation from a perception perspective such as a study by Aladdin (2010) which examined attitudes and motivation towards learning Arabic in Malaysia. Unlike previous studies which examined the impact of motivation on learning by conducting longitudinal studies, the goal of this study is to examine how students perceive of the weight of motivation. In order words, this study tests the weight of motivation from a perception perspective in order to provide further evidence that highlights the importance of motivation in language learning from a subjective angle. This study reports on a direct questionnaire examining students’ response to the effect of the three innate psychological needs on language learning. It is hypothesized that relatedness, autonomy and sense of belonging should be ranked highly by all the respondents who took part in this study. The goal of the study is to answer the following research Questions: How do students perceive of the importance of motivation? What is the weight given to each psychological need in terms of students’ perception? How do students in the main group perceive of the role of motivation compared to the control groups? What are the theoretical and pedagogical implications of the study of motivation from a perceptual perspective?

2 Background

The study of motivation is an old inquiry which started as early as the fifties, before its focus on human-beings, motivation research tested primates (Harlow, 1950). Theories dealing with motivation focus on “what energizes and gives direction to behavior” and attempt to predict “learning, performance, and behavior change” (Ryan and Deci, 2017, p. 13). Motivation research investigates “how external inputs affected the natural and spontaneous propensities of people to seek challenges, and assimilate new information” (Ryan and Deci, 2017, p. 19). One of the main theories dealing with motivation is the cognitive evaluation theory (CET) (see Deci & Ryan, 1980a) which examines the impact of social environments on intrinsic motivation and performance. The interest in motivation as a research inquiry has given birth to various mini-theories within SDT such as organismic integration theory (OIT), causality orientations theory (COT), basic psychological needs theory (BPNT), goal contents theory (GCT), and relationship motivation theory (RMT).

While other theories dealing with motivation focus either on the amount (expectancy– valence theories as in Feather, 1990) or strength of motivation as is the case for cognitive- behavioral theories (Seligman, 1975), SDT focuses on the types and sources of motivation. SDT distinguishes between two forms of motivation some of which maybe “entirely volitional, reflecting one’s interests or values, whereas others can be wholly external, as when one is coerced or pressured into doing something he or she does not find of value.” (Ryan and Deci, 2017, p. 14). This distinction is based on what is referred to in SDT as autonomous versus controlled regulations. According to SDT, behaviors can be either autonomously motivated to the point that “the person experiences volition to the extent that he or she assents to, concurs with, and is wholly willing to engage in the behaviors” (Ryan and Deci, 2017, p. 14). Controlled behaviors represent situations where a person feels internally or externally urged to act. An individual is controlled when their motivation is driven by external forces which lead a person “to act in ways that are incongruent or alien with respect to the person’s sense of self” (Ryan and Deci, 2017, p. 14).

In order to better understand the difference between autonomous versus controlled behavior, it is important to mention a crucial distinction made in SDT between intrinsic versus extrinsic motivation. Within SDT, “intrinsically motivated behaviors are those that are performed out of interest and for which the primary “reward” is the spontaneous feelings of effectance and enjoyment that accompany
the behaviors” (Ryan and Deci, 2017, p. 14). An example of this is someone who learns Japanese because he or she is fond of Japanese anime. As to extrinsic motivation, it involves “behaviors that are instrumental for some separable consequence such as an external reward or social approval, avoidance of punishment, or the attainment of a valued outcome” (Ryan and Deci, 2000b). While behaviors driven by intrinsic motivation are autonomous, behaviors driven by extrinsic motivation may be either autonomous or controlled. As explained by Ryan and Deci (2017, p. 14), in one case behaviors driven by extrinsic motivation may be relatively controlled when the driving force behind the behavior is either reward or punishment, in the other case the same behaviors may be autonomous when the behavior triggers “outcomes that are personally valued or important”. The distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation has been also discussed by Payne, Rocks, and Schaffner (2014). The authors argue that intrinsic motivation should be seen as “the drive to pursue an activity for the pleasure or satisfaction derived from the activity itself”, while extrinsic motivation “involves pursuing an activity out of a sense of obligation or as a means to an end” (Fairchild et al., 2005, p. 47).

Like physiological needs, psychological needs are considered by SDT to be objective phenomena in the sense that “their deprivation or satisfaction has clear and measurable functional effects, effects that obtain regardless of one’s subjective goals or values” (Ryan and Deci, 2017, p. 10). This means that regardless whether or not one gives value to these psychological needs, their growth will be impacted by their satisfaction or deprivation. According to SDT, the satisfaction of psychological needs requires social and environmental support. The assumption for SDT is that though the human nature is by default designed to be active, the impact of the environment may either help the individual to flourish, thrive, and prosper and or to stagnate and fail. In other words, “the support versus neglect of basic needs is critical in influencing the flourishing or diminishment of people’s inherent capacities to fully function” (Ryan and Deci, 2017, p. 10). Following the same line of thought, the goal of this paper is to examine the impact of the three psychological needs on learning and to find out if whether motivation is a subjective phenomenon. In other words, the goal of this paper is to test if students are conscious and aware of the weight attributed to the three psychological needs and of their impact on learning motivation.

3 The study

3.1 Participants

The participants in this study are split into two categories: main group and control groups. Both groups include undergraduate students from universities in the US. While the main group includes 50 students learning Standard Arabic (Arabic henceforth) as a foreign language, the control groups include 60 students learning French, Spanish or Japanese. The participants in both the main group and control groups are native speakers of English. The goal of adding three control groups is to compare their results with the results obtained from of the main group. This comparison will allow us to see if there is a pattern among all groups. The control groups will also allow us to make some generalizations about the impact of motivation on learning a second language in general.

3.2 The stimuli

The stimuli included three lists testing the weight of the three psychological needs: sense of belonging, competence, and autonomy. Each list included 5 conditions.

List A: Belonging

Learning a second language is better achieved if:
1) Students have a good relationship with their classmates.
2) Students feel they are loved and respected by their classmates and professor.
3) Students feel they are cared for by their classmates and professor.
4) Students feel connected to their classmates and professor.
5) Students feel that the classroom is a welcoming space.

List B: Autonomy
Learning a second language is better achieved if:
1) Students can choose which tasks to do in the classroom.
2) Students can choose their language partners.
3) Students can choose topics for their papers.
4) Students are asked to create new tasks.
5) Students can act with a choice and freedom.

List C: Competence
Learning a second language is better achieved if:
1) Students receive positive and encouraging feedback.
2) Students feel that their efforts are acknowledged.
3) Students are given the opportunity to help their classmates.
4) Students are given the opportunity to present their work to the whole class.
5) Students are made aware that they have reached the desired learning goals and objectives

4 Method

Using the semantic differential tables, a common method in this type of language-related experience, respondents were asked to read the conditions related to the three psychological needs and rank the weight of each condition by choosing one of seven options. As explained in (Garrett, 2010), the semantic differentiation tables may provide better results compared to the Likert scale. While in the Likert scale participants are asked to choose whether they “agree” or “disagree” with a given condition, respondents in the semantic differential tables are offered more than two options to choose from. According to Garrett (2010), the use of the semantic differentiation tables may yield results that reflect respondents’ evaluations in an accurate way. As this is a direct questionnaire, respondents from each group were asked to respond to fifteen conditions. For each innate psychological need, participants had to rate five conditions. Participants were asked the following question:

Use the 1-7 scale to indicate whether you agree or not with the condition.
(Choose 1 if you do not agree, choose 7 if you totally agree, and 4 if you do not know the answer)
1 - 2 - 3 - 4 - 5 - 6 – 7

After reading each condition, respondents had to rate it using the scale listed above. The study was conducted in one setting and took about 30 minutes to complete. Participants wrote their answers on a piece of paper and handed it to the investigator once they completed the questionnaire. Prior to the questionnaire, respondents had to complete a personal information form about their age, education, and languages.
5 Results

The statistical analysis conducted on the data was descriptive statistics. There was no need to conduct inferential statistics such as mixed-effects Anova because the goal is not to find the statistical significance of the main variables: belonging, autonomy, and competence. Descriptive statistics in this study serve the need to provide simple descriptions and reveal the weight given to each variable. The results of the main group as well as the control groups will be presented in one table to allow us to compare the results among all the groups. The overall results, shown in table 1, will also allow us to see if there are any patterns.

Table 1: Overall results of the impact of motivation on language learning

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Arabic</th>
<th>French</th>
<th>Spanish</th>
<th>Japanese</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Belonging</td>
<td>6.60</td>
<td>6.01</td>
<td>6.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Autonomy</td>
<td>5.00</td>
<td>4.90</td>
<td>5.27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Competence</td>
<td>6.12</td>
<td>5.83</td>
<td>5.90</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The overall results do not include the rate attributed to each of the five conditions in each variable, they just show the overall value attributed to a given category. The overall results show that sense of belonging was ranked higher by the participants in the main group as well as the control groups. What is interesting is that there is a pattern when it comes to the ranking of the weight attributed to each psychological need. For the four groups, the weight of the psychological needs was ranked as follows:

Belonging > Competence > Autonomy

A clear pattern is seen, all groups gave more weight to sense of belonging followed by competence and then autonomy. We could also see that for sense of belonging, the highest ranking was given by the main group, learners of Arabic. While the overall results presented the weight attributed to the category as a whole, the group results included the ranking attributed to each of the five conditions in a given category. The results of the main group are shown in table (2)

Table 2: Results of the impact of motivation for learners of Arabic

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Belonging</th>
<th>Autonomy</th>
<th>Competence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Q1</td>
<td>6.50</td>
<td>4.38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q2</td>
<td>6.68</td>
<td>4.52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q3</td>
<td>6.50</td>
<td>5.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q4</td>
<td>6.54</td>
<td>5.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q5</td>
<td>6.78</td>
<td>5.54</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As we can see from table (2), the conditions for sense of belonging received higher rankings compared to the conditions in autonomy and competence. For sense of belonging, condition five (learning a second language is better achieved if students feel that the classroom is a welcoming space) outranked the other conditions. For autonomy, condition five (learning a second language is better achieved if students can act with a choice and freedom) outranked the rest of the conditions. As to competence, condition one (learning a second language is better achieved if students receive positive and encouraging feedback) gained more weight compared to the other conditions in the same category. As we can see from the results of learners of Arabic, all the conditions in sense of belonging were ranked higher than the conditions in autonomy and competence. This indicates that it is not only that the overall
results of sense of belonging which outranked competence and autonomy, but it is also the case that every single condition in sense of belonging was ranked higher than the conditions in autonomy and competence. It is important to note that there was one exception to what I just mentioned, condition one for competence was ranked higher than condition one for sense of belonging. I will return to this point in the discussion section.

The group results for the control groups reinforce the findings obtained from the main group. The results of the learners of French and Spanish are shown below in tables (3) and (4):

**Table 3: Results of the impact of motivation for the learners of French**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Belonging</th>
<th>Autonomy</th>
<th>Competence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Q1</td>
<td>5.70</td>
<td>4.40</td>
<td>6.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q2</td>
<td>5.95</td>
<td>4.80</td>
<td>6.45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q3</td>
<td>6.05</td>
<td>5.05</td>
<td>5.65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q4</td>
<td>5.90</td>
<td>4.85</td>
<td>4.65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q5</td>
<td>6.45</td>
<td>5.40</td>
<td>6.15</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 4: Results of the impact of motivation for learners of Spanish**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Belonging</th>
<th>Autonomy</th>
<th>Competence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Q1</td>
<td>5.95</td>
<td>4.95</td>
<td>6.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q2</td>
<td>5.90</td>
<td>5.20</td>
<td>6.40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q3</td>
<td>6.20</td>
<td>5.60</td>
<td>5.85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q4</td>
<td>6.20</td>
<td>4.95</td>
<td>4.95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q5</td>
<td>6.40</td>
<td>5.65</td>
<td>6.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Similar to the results of the main group, condition five in belonging and autonomy were given more weight by learners of French and Spanish. This reinforce the weight attributed to sense of belonging (creating a welcoming classroom) and autonomy (allowing students to act with a choice and freedom). As to competence, the results of learners of French and Spanish differ from the main group. Condition two, which reinforces acknowledging students’ efforts, outranked the rest of the conditions. The results of learners of Japanese show some similarities with the main group as well as with learners of French and Spanish. The results of learners of Japanese are shown in table (5) below:

**Table 5: Results of the impact of motivation for learners of Japanese**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Belonging</th>
<th>Autonomy</th>
<th>Competence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Q1</td>
<td>5.40</td>
<td>4.05</td>
<td>6.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q2</td>
<td>6.45</td>
<td>5.20</td>
<td>6.60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q3</td>
<td>5.55</td>
<td>5.60</td>
<td>5.80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q4</td>
<td>6.05</td>
<td>4.60</td>
<td>4.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q5</td>
<td>6.50</td>
<td>5.32</td>
<td>6.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The results of the Japanese group as shown in table (5) above indicate that the condition that received the highest ranking for sense of belonging was condition five, creating a welcoming classroom. It seems that the four groups consider condition five of crucial importance. As to competence, similar to the French and Spanish group, the Japanese group gave more weight to condition two, acknowledging students’ efforts. Unlike the Arabic, French and Spanish groups, the Japanese group gave more weight
to condition three for autonomy which reinforces giving students the freedom to choose topics for their papers.

As it has been demonstrated above, the results show four clear patterns. The first pattern is that both the main group and the control groups ranked condition five for sense of belonging criteria higher than the other conditions. This means that respondents from the four groups consider creating a welcoming classroom space an important learning condition. The second pattern is that all the groups, with the exception of the Japanese group, ranked condition five for autonomy higher than the other conditions. While the Arabic, French, and Spanish group considered acting with a choice and freedom the most important learning condition, the Japanese group gave higher rate to condition three which highlights the students’ ability to choose topics for their papers. The third pattern is that the Japanese, French and Spanish groups gave higher rate for condition two for the competence criteria. This means that the three groups believe that acknowledging students’ efforts is crucial to learning.

6 Discussion, Theoretical & Pedagogical Implications

This paper seeks to examine the weight given to the three psychological needs from a perception perspective. The goal is to test if students consider support of sense of belonging, autonomy and competence crucial to language learning in particular and learning in general. The other goal is to compare the weight attributed to each psychological need. The findings of this study pointed out that the three psychological needs were ranked highly by all the groups who took part in this study. Though competence is viewed as one of the most important elements in motivated actions (Deci, 1975; Harter 2012), the findings of the study pinpointed that the most important psychological need that gives energy and moves people to action is relatedness or sense of belonging. This implies that without an environment that creates sense of belonging and acknowledges one’s strengths, positive behavior is thwarted and one’s feelings of autonomy or competence are nullified. While SDT considers perceived autonomy and competence to be the “proximal psychological factors implicated in intrinsic motivation” (Ryan and Deci, 2017, p. 17), the findings of this study show the high value attributed to sense of belonging. This by no means indicate that autonomy and competence are not important, but it only emphasizes the value attributed to sense of belonging. The findings also give evidence that sense of belonging is not only crucial to the “internalization of extrinsic motivation” (Ryan and Deci, 2017, p. 17), but it is also crucial to perceived intrinsic motivation.

Though sense of belonging received the highest rankings, autonomy and competence were also perceived to be important and crucial factors in language learning. It is important to note that as far as competence is concerned, the score of condition four (learning a second language is better achieved if students are given a chance to present their work to the whole class) may have impacted the overall results. Some students may find presenting their work to their classmates a face-threatening act and as a matter of fact condition four may not receive high evaluations. Even though condition four may be ill-phrased, the score of competence remains high. The fact that the three psychological needs received high evaluations may be due to the intertwined relationship between autonomy and relatedness which is part of the research within relationship motivation theory (RMT), a mini-theory within SDT. RMT considers relatedness a core psychological need and “addresses the intertwined nature of relatedness and autonomy needs and their synergism in truly responsive, mutually satisfying relationships” (Ryan and Deci, 2017, p. 19). RMT considers the three psychological needs to be equally important and that support for sense of belonging requires support for autonomy and competence. As discussed in Ryan and Deci (2017, p. 19), “although internalization is based in actual or desired relatedness to others, the individuals will not become securely connected to those others and the internalizations will not become fully integrated and volitionally persistent without supports for autonomy and competence”. This means that though sense of belonging is crucial for the internalization of intrinsic motivation,
lack of support for autonomy and competence may negatively impact the internalization of intrinsic motivation.

The implications of this study are twofold: pedagogical and theoretical. In terms of the theoretical implications, this study provides evidence that the three psychological needs are not only “objective phenomenon” as it is seen within SDT, but they are also a subjective phenomenon. For SDT, the deprivation or satisfaction of the psychological needs “has clear and measurable functional effects, effects that obtain regardless of one’s subjective goals or values” (Ryan and Deci, 2017, p. 10). This means that regardless whether one sees the value of the psychological needs or not, they remain crucial to one’s growth and success. This explains why most studies focused on testing the value of the psychological needs through longitudinal studies and kind of downgraded the study of motivation from a perception perspective. To fill the gap, this study focuses on the perception angle to add some subjectivity to the study of the psychological needs. In other words, this study shows that the three psychological needs are not only “objective phenomenon” but “subjective phenomenon” as well. It is important to note that the expression “subjective phenomenon” does not refer to what Kramsch (2006) calls the “multilingual subject” to describe what foreign language learners feel about their language learning experience and why it is important. The expression merely means that students are conscious and aware of the importance of the three psychological needs. Adding some subjectivity to the three psychological needs reinforces the role of motivation in creating a productive and successful learning environment.

The other theoretical implication is providing further discussion of the three forms of “amotivation” (Ryan and Deci, 2017). The term amotivation is used “to describe people’s lack of intentionality and motivation - that is, to describe the extent to which they are passive, ineffective, or without purpose with respect to any given set of potential actions” (Ryan and Deci, 2017, p. 16). For SDT, lack of motivation or amotivation varies from a situation to another and may have three forms (Vansteenkiste et al., 2005). The first form of amotivation may result from the feeling that one cannot reach his/her goals due to the fact the one cannot control outcomes or “perform required actions” (Ryan and Deci, 2017, p. 16). This form of amotivation is linked with lack of competence. The second form of amotivation may result from lack of “interest, relevance, or value” (Ryan and Deci, 2017, p. 16). It is important to note that according to SDT this form of amotivation may occur even when the person concerned does not lack competence and efficacy. The third form of amotivation results from defiance and resistance (Van Petegem et al., 2015). This type of amotivation is in fact “a motivated nonaction or oppositional behavior to defy demands that are thwarting a basic need for autonomy or relatedness” (Ryan and Deci, 2017, p. 16). Lack of motivation among students is oftentimes linked with the first and second form of a motivation but rarely with the third one. In other words, lack of motivation may be attributed to students’ lack of ability to reach their goals, the first form, or to the lack of “interest, relevance, or value” among students, the second form. It is rare when lack of motivation is associated with the third form of amotivation, lack of support of the psychological needs. While many instructors may focus on the first or second form of amotivation, not so many instructors pay attention to the third form of a motivation. The findings of this study revisit the three forms of “a motivation” (Ryan and Deci, 2017) and highlight the weight that should be attributed to the third form by reinforcing the significance of providing support for autonomy, competence and sense of belonging in classrooms. Understanding the three forms of amotivation and finding ways to avoid them will help in achieving a successful learning experience.

As to the pedagogical implications, this paper calls attention to the value of the three psychological needs in creating successful classrooms. As mentioned above, sense of belonging was ranked higher than autonomy and competence. The significance of sense of belonging was discussed by Kaplan, Feinberg & Tal (2009) who argued that classroom climates that give weight to relatedness and inclusion succeed in making students connected to their schools. The results of this study accentuate
the weight of sense of belonging and show that without building connection with the school or the classroom, students may risk lacking motivation. The results of this study also reinforce the importance of autonomy as a psychological need. The value of autonomy in education has been discussed by Ryan & Deci who argue that autonomy-supportive educational contexts have a noticeable impact on learning (Ryan and Deci, 2000a, Ryan and Deci, 2013, Ryan and Deci, 2016). Ryan and Deci argue that educators who ignore the value of autonomy and adopt controlling measure of learning may risk creating an environment that does not encourage learning. As clearly explained by Ryan and Deci (2017) “controlled motivation has been shown to predict not only more impoverished learning but also greater behavioral problems and risk of disengagement or dropout” (2017, 17). Ryan and Deci (2017) also argue that “school climates that support autonomy foster more self-motivation, persistence, and quality of learning” (17). The findings of this study foreground the need to provide support for autonomy to create better learning outcomes. This is because “the more autonomous the motivational form, generally the more the individual has access to organismic supports for acting, which in part explains the energetic, affective, and cognitive advantages of autonomy as a characteristic of action” (Ryan and Deci, 2017, p. 15).

The overall results indicate that the most important factor that creates motivation in the classroom and provide support for the three psychological needs is creating a welcoming environment and promoting a culture of respect and love. One would ask: how can we create such an environment? I believe that there is an easy way to achieve this goal by taking the following steps: from the very first days of class, instructors should invest in creating sense of belonging among students. This can be achieved if students are given the opportunity to know each other by letting them interact with one another. The continuous interactions among students will help them become familiar with each other and as a result build gradually sense of belonging. The second important factor is competence. Support for competence can be achieved if students feel that their efforts are acknowledged. This can be attained if instructors build the habit of giving positive feedback during classroom interactions with the students. Support for competence can also be accomplished if instructors grade assignment in a timely manner and include positive feedback. In addition to what is said before, it is important to provide support for autonomy as well. We all know that students prefer to act with freedom and volition. Autonomy can be fulfilled if students start to feel that they are not passive agents but active members in the classroom. Sense of freedom and volition provide support for the psychological need of autonomy. Acting with choice and volition may be achieved by simply asking students to choose their language partners, to decide whether they want to perform an activity in pairs, small groups, or as a whole class. Autonomy can also result from giving students the opportunity to create a new task instead of always assigning one.

To conclude, this paper highlights the perceived weight attributed to the three psychological needs and the impact of social environments on intrinsic motivation. It is important to signal that social environments that provide support for the three psychological needs “facilitate more autonomous functioning, which in turn yields more effective performance […], whereas social contexts that fail to support and/or actively thwart these basic psychological needs tend to promote controlled motivation or amotivation, which in turn yields poorer performance” (Ryan and Deci, 2017, pp. 16–17). This shows the strong correlation between support (or lack of support) of the three psychological needs and motivation (or lack of motivation/amotivation). Social environments where the psychological needs are supported are more likely to drive people to action. According to SDT, relatedness is created not only when one feels socially connected, loved and cared for but also when one feels that he/she is significant and worthy of attention. This means that relatedness can be thwarted in environments where one does not feel significant or worthy of attention. Competence is also blocked in environments where “feelings of mastery and effectiveness are diminished or undermined” (Ryan and Deci, 2017, p. 11) and also in environments where negative feedback and person-focused criticism prevail. It is important to note that while this study uses learners of Arabic as the main group, it is meant to investigate
the impact of motivation on learning in general. Finally, it should be acknowledged that this study has many limitations, such as lack of a follow-up study, and it also should be acknowledged that this study is meant to trigger further robust studies that may shed more light on the weight of the three psychological needs from a perception perspective.

7 Conclusion

Research based on self-determination theory (SDT) has investigated how socio-contextual factors may either facilitate or forestall the process of self-motivation. Research within SDT reveal that social contexts that provide support and satisfaction of the three psychological needs are oftentimes contexts where “people’s curiosity, creativity, productivity, and compassion are most robustly expressed” (Ryan and Deci, 2017, p. 5). According to SDT, “the dynamics of autonomy, competence, and relatedness are crucial for understanding human agency and volition” (Ryan, 1992; Deci and Ryan, 2000). In light of SDT, this paper highlights the impact of autonomy, competence and belonging on second language learning from a perception perspective. Along similar lines with SDT, this study reinforces the claim that “contextual supports for the three needs” and “more self-determined functioning is associated with greater creativity, superior learning” and “better performance” (Ryan and Deci, 2017, p. 17). The contribution of this paper is both pedagogical and theoretical. At the pedagogical level, this paper provides perceptual evidence showing that providing support for the three psychological needs will result in better learning environments. This paper also discusses better ways that may create a welcoming and successful classroom environment. At the theoretical level, this paper provides further discussion of the three forms of a motivation (Ryan and Deci, 2017) and explains that a better understanding of these forms may ensure better learning outcomes. Finally, this study shows that students are aware of the impact of motivation on learning and adds some subjectivity to an important aspect in education which has always been considered an objective phenomenon (Ryan and Deci, 2017).
Appendix (a)
Study Questionnaire

Please give your opinion about these conditions. Use the 1-7 scale to indicate whether you agree or not with the condition.
1 - 2 - 3 - 4 - 5 - 6 - 7

First, please circle the second language you are learning: Arabic, French, Spanish, Chinese, or Japanese

List A: Belonging
1) Learning a second language is better achieved if students have a good relationship with their classmates.
1 - 2 - 3 - 4 - 5 - 6 - 7
2) Learning a second language is better achieved if students feel they are loved and respected by their classmates and professor.
1 - 2 - 3 - 4 - 5 - 6 - 7
3) Learning a second language is better achieved if students feel they are cared for by their classmates and professor.
1 - 2 - 3 - 4 - 5 - 6 - 7
4) Learning a second language is better achieved if students feel connected to their classmates and professor.
1 - 2 - 3 - 4 - 5 - 6 - 7
5) Learning a second language is better achieved if students feel that the classroom is a welcoming space.
1 - 2 - 3 - 4 - 5 - 6 - 7

List B: Autonomy
1) Learning a second language is better achieved if students can choose which tasks to do in the classroom.
1 - 2 - 3 - 4 - 5 - 6 - 7
2) Learning a second language is better achieved if students can choose their language partners.
1 - 2 - 3 - 4 - 5 - 6 - 7
3) Learning a second language is better achieved if students can choose topics for their papers.
1 - 2 - 3 - 4 - 5 - 6 - 7
4) Learning a second language is better achieved if students are asked to create new tasks.
1 - 2 - 3 - 4 - 5 - 6 - 7
5) Learning a second language is better achieved if students can act with a choice and freedom.
1 - 2 - 3 - 4 - 5 - 6 - 7

List C: Competence
1) Learning a second language is better achieved if students receive positive and encouraging feedback.
1 - 2 - 3 - 4 - 5 - 6 - 7
2) Learning a second language is better achieved if students feel that their efforts are acknowledged.
1 - 2 - 3 - 4 - 5 - 6 - 7
3) Learning a second language is better achieved if students are given a chance to help their classmates.

4) Learning a second language is better achieved if student are given a chance to present their work to the whole class.

5) Learning a second language is better achieved if students are made aware that they reached the desired learning goals and objectives.

Appendix (b)
Language Background Questionnaire:

Participant number: __________

A. General Information

1. Sex: F □ M □
2. Age: 19-30 □ 31-50 □ Over 50 □
3. What is your educational level? Primary school □ High school □ College □

B. Languages that you know

1) Do you consider yourself a native speaker of English? __________
2) What is your mother’s native language? __________
3) What is your father’s native language? __________
4) Which language(s) did you speak at home from birth until age 12? __________
5) What is your proficiency level in other language(s) that you know? Rate from 5 to 1: 5 for native like, 4 fluent, 3 good, 2 basic skills, 1 a few words.
   Arabic: __________
   Spanish: __________
   Other: __________
6) At what age were you first exposed to Arabic or any language other than English? __________
7) In what context were you exposed to Arabic or any language other than English? At school □ Outside school □ Both □
8. For how long and where did you learn Arabic or any language other than English? __________

Please note, for questions 6 to 8 please specify the language you are learning if it is not Arabic
References


