Re-examination of Psychological Needs and L2 Motivation of Japanese EFL learners: An Interview Study

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Abstract

The purposes of this study are to (a) re-examine the definitions of Japanese university EFL learners' needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness and (b) make suggestions on improving a commonly used EFL learner questionnaire based on self-determination theory (SDT). The theory postulates that the more individuals' innate psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness are fulfilled, the more their behavior is intrinsically motivated. Many second language acquisition (SLA) researchers have applied the framework to the language-learning context, helping to shed light on L2 learners' motivation. In studies of Japanese EFL learner motivation, one questionnaire (Hiromori, 2006a) has been widely used or adopted. Those studies yielded results both in line and out of line with the theory. This calls for a re-examination of the relationship between needs fulfillment and motivation and of the commonly used questionnaire. In this study, 18 Japanese university EFL learners participated in a semi-structured interview. The analysis of interview data showed that (i) whereas the fulfillment of autonomy - meaning freedom of choice - might motivate some L2 learners, it can demotivate

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others; (ii) a good relationship with the teacher might motivate learners while a good relationship with other classmates can have a positive or marginal impact on L2 motivation, depending on the learner; and (iii) competence needs satisfaction is most likely to motivate Japanese EFL learners. The results suggest three aspects that should be considered to improve the commonly used questionnaire in the Japanese EFL setting: (1) a redefinition of L2 learners' autonomy needs; (2) an amendment of autonomy-related items based on the redefinition; and (3) the addition of items to gauge the teacher–student relationship. Studies similar to the current one should be conducted to test the applicability of a motivational questionnaire and SDT in various settings.

Key words*: EFL learners' motivation, self-determination theory, semi-structured interview

Introduction

In second language acquisition (SLA) research, second/foreign language (L2) learners' motivation is one of the most abundantly investigated areas (for a review, see Lasagabaster, Doiz, & Sierra, 2014; Uebuchi, 2004). In the 1950s, Robert Gardner and his associates initiated investigations into the role of attitude and motivation in L2 learning within socio-educational framework research (e.g., Gardner, 1985; Gardner & Lambert, 1972). This line of research focused primarily on general motivational components of integrative and instrumental motivation. Integrative motivation is characterized by learners' willingness to integrate into the target language community and culture. Instrumental motivation, by contrast, refers to a more practical reason for learning an L2 - namely, to gain social and/or economic rewards through L2 achievement. Although Gardner and his associates argued that integrative motivation was a predictor of L2 acquisition (e.g., Gardner, 2000; Gardner, Lalonde, & Moorcroft, 1985), some researchers (e.g., Dörnyei, 1990; Kurahachi, 1994; Lamb, 2004; Yashima, 2000) raised the issue that integrative motivation might not be relevant for EFL learners because they have little direct exposure to a community or culture of native speakers of the L2 and, therefore, are unlikely to have a clear target language community or culture.

In subsequent motivation research, self-determination theory (SDT) (Deci & Ryan, 1985, 2000, 2002) became one of the most influential theories. SDT was originally a large-scale theory used to explain human motivation in general. Many SLA researchers have applied the framework

to the language-learning context, which helped unfold L2 motivation processes (Noels, 2003). SDT studies have been conducted in many countries, including Japan. The vast majority of such studies conducted in Japan used or adapted one questionnaire (Hiromori, 2006a) and yielded results both in line and out of line with the theory. This poses two questions: (a) existence or non-existence of the causality between the psychological needs and motivation, especially the link between autonomy and motivation; and (b) validity of the commonly used, SDT-based questionnaire in the Japanese EFL setting. This study re-examines the relationship between Japanese EFL learners' motivation and fulfillment of their needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness. The study also aims to offer suggestions for improving the commonly used questionnaire in the Japanese EFL setting.

Background of the Study

Self-Determination Theory

In SDT, motivation resides along a continuum among intrinsic motivation at one end, extrinsic motivation in the middle, and amotivation at the other end (see Figure 1). Intrinsic motivation refers to the motivation to engage in something because the action itself is enjoyable and satisfying, whereas extrinsic motivation is a drive to do something for an independent outcome (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Deci and Ryan postulated four regulations within extrinsic motivation, depending on the degree of internalization involved in the action: integrated, identified, introjected, and external regulations. As their labels suggest, integrated regulation is the most self-determined form of regulation, whereas external regulation is the least autonomous. Placed at the opposite end of the scale from intrinsic motivation is amotivation, a state of no regulation/motivation.

SDT presupposes the existence of three basic psychological needs: the needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness. This theory offers different types of motivation and degrees of regulation to show how we can be motivated, depending on how much our needs are satisfied. Thus, the more individuals' innate psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness are fulfilled, the more their behavior is intrinsically motivated.

Needs for autonomy are defined as individuals' desire for "being the perceived origin or source of one's own behavior" (Deci & Ryan, 2002, p. 8). Deci and Ryan further explained that autonomy pertains to acting from interest and integrated values; thus, "when autonomous,

individuals experience their behavior as an expression of the self, such that, even when actions are influenced by outside sources, the actors concur with those influences, feeling both initiative and value with regard to them" (p. 8). In the Japanese EFL context, one can argue that needs for autonomy are commonly defined as learners' wanting to learn English more autonomously (Hiromori, 2006a). Interpreted more concretely, they are learners' needs for determining their actions themselves and for taking responsibility for their own studies. The definitions are reflected in widely used questionnaire items to measure the degree of Japanese EFL learners' autonomy needs fulfillment, such as "I am free to express my ideas and opinions on English learning," "My feelings are taken into consideration in English classes," "My teacher asks for the opinions of students about the content and/or procedure of the class," and "My teacher always decides what to study in the English course" (reversed item) (Hiromori, 2006a, 2006b; Tanaka & Hiromori, 2007).

Needs for competence refer to people's desire to feel "effective in one's ongoing interactions with the social environment and experiencing opportunities to exercise and express one's capacities" (Deci & Ryan, 2002, p. 7). Applied to the English learning setting, they are interpreted as individuals' desire to be able to understand and make themselves understood in English based on their capability and confidence to successfully complete English assignments and tasks (Hiromori, 2006a). These definitions are the basis of questionnaire items commonly used to measure the degree of competence needs satisfaction of Japanese EFL learners, such as "I think I can get a good grade in English," "I am satisfied with my effort in English classes," and "I feel a sense of achievement in the English course" (Hiromori, 2006a, 2006b; Tanaka & Hiromori, 2007).

Finally, needs for relatedness are expressed in the desire to feel "connected to others, to caring for and being cared for by those others, [and] to having a sense of belongingness both with other individuals and with one's community" (Deci & Ryan, 2002, p. 7). In the English learning setting, these needs can be translated as wanting to connect with other classmates and the teacher as well as engage in English learning cooperatively with other classmates and the teacher (Hiromori, 2006a). Questionnaire items reflecting this definition include "I work hand-in-hand with my friends on a group activity" and "I get along with my friends during an English class" (Hiromori, 2006a, 2006b).

Self-determination theory: SDT

Quality of Behavior	Nonself-determined					Self-determined
Type of Motivation	Amotivation	Extrinsic Motivation				Intrinsic Motivation
Type of Regulation	Non-regulation	External Regulation	Introjected Regulation	Identified Regulation	Integrated Regulation	Intrinsic Regulation
Perceived Locus of Causality	Impersonal	External	Somewhat External	Somewhat Internal	Internal	Internal

Figure 1. The self-determination continuum, with types of motivation, types of regulation, and locus of causality. Adapted from Deci, E. L., and Ryan, R. M., (Eds.), 2002, *Handbook of self-determination research,* p.16.

Research Based on SDT in the Japanese EFL Context

A strong emphasis has been placed on English in the Japanese formal educational setting; it is one of the three main subjects in junior and senior high schools, and almost all universities require English language courses for at least first- and second-year students, regardless of their majors. However, students are not always willing to learn English; some students even experience demotivation when learning English (Agawa & Ueda, 2013; Yamamori, 2004). Given such circumstances, EFL learners' motivation is of great interest to many researchers and practitioners in Japan, and more knowledge on this matter has been actively sought. Several motivational studies have dealt with SDT in the Japanese EFL context, as this theory is one of the most influential in motivation research. For example, Hiromori (2006a) collected questionnaire data from university students and used a structural equation modeling (SEM) analysis to confirm the causal relationship between the fulfillment of innate needs and motivation as hypothesized in the theory. Yet the model's goodness of fit was relatively poor.[1] In Otoshi and Heffernan's (2011) study, data were collected at two universities, and participants were either business or English majors. The results yielded a somewhat acceptable level of fit indices of the model; however, the sufficiency of autonomy needs did not display a causal relationship with intrinsic motivation. Moreover, Agawa and Takeuchi's (2016) study, in which 317 participants from academically varied universities responded to a questionnaire, found that

autonomy needs fulfillment has a negative impact on intrinsic or extrinsic motivation of Japanese L2 learners and, furthermore, might even demotivate them. The fit indices of the model reached an acceptable level in the study.

Some studies have sought to determine if pedagogical interventions to fulfill English learners' three basic needs improve their intrinsic motivation. A few studies, such as Dei (2011), Hiromori (2006a, 2006b), and Tanaka and Hiromori (2007), demonstrated that satisfying the innate needs could generally enhance English learners' motivation. Conversely, Maekawa and Yashima (2012) did not observe an increase in their participants' self-determined regulations in their L2 study, although their psychological needs were successfully satisfied.

The mixed results shown in the previous studies suggest the necessity of investigating two points: the review of the relationship between psychological needs fulfillment and motivation and the review of commonly used measurement scales. First, the unstable causal relationship between needs fulfillment and L2 motivation indicated in previous studies requires a review of the relationship between psychological needs satisfaction and motivation of Japanese EFL learners. In particular, as the relationship between autonomy needs fulfillment and motivation is a causal relationship that acts least in line with the theory, the existence or non-existence of the causality should be more closely investigated than the causalities involving the other two needs. In the following subsections, the authors will take a close look at the literature related to autonomy needs fulfillment and its impact on L2 motivation. Second, the inconsistent results of studies that have drawn from different samples call for a review of the measurement instrument. All of the aforementioned studies used or adopted the questionnaire originally developed by Hiromori (2006a); thus, it is possible that the questionnaire has some aspects that need to be improved. In the following subsections, the authors will discuss autonomy needs and L2 motivation before raising possible issues regarding the widely used questionnaire.

Influence of Autonomy Needs Fulfillment on L2 Motivation

The central feature of learner autonomy, which many researchers agree on, is that students should take responsibility for their own learning (e.g., Benson, 2003; Holec, 1981; Little, 1991). Littlewood (1999) claimed that "taking responsibility" pertains to learners taking ownership of learning processes, such as deciding on goals, choosing approaches, and evaluating

outcomes. From this perspective, autonomy support, in a nutshell, means giving students a choice.

However, some researchers have argued that autonomy is perceived differently depending on the sociocultural and educational settings. For example, Littlewood (1999) suggested two kinds of language learners' autonomy: (a) proactive autonomy and (b) reactive autonomy. Following Holec's (1981) definition, Littlewood defined proactive autonomy as the "ability to take charge of learning, determining objectives, selecting methods and techniques, and evaluating what has been acquired" (p. 75). Expanding on this conventional concept, he proposed an additional form of autonomy: reactive autonomy. Reactive autonomy is defined as "the kind of autonomy which does not create its own directions but, once a direction has been initiated, enables learners to organize their resources autonomously in order to reach their goal" (p. 75). Through his careful observation and discussion of learners in different cultures, Littlewood proposed that East Asian students would have a high level of reactive autonomy.

Iyengar and Lepper (1999) shed light on autonomy in different cultures via an empirical study. They investigated the relationship between the degree of self-determination and intensity of intrinsic motivation in children. They compared Anglo-American and Asian-American pupils between seven and nine years old and found that Anglo-American children were more intrinsically motivated when they could choose what they would learn than when others made those choices for them. In contrast, Asian-American children were more intrinsically motivated when the choices were made by trusted authority figures (i.e., their mothers) or peers compared to themselves.

Having choices might not be as valued by Japanese students either; this could continue to be the case even after they finish secondary school. Nakata (2006, 2010) suggested that, upon entrance to a university, many students are not willing to enforce learner autonomy. To explain this phenomenon, he pointed to the educational context in Japanese junior and senior high schools, where most learners are exposed to exam-oriented learning with a teacher-centered approach in a large class (usually 35–40 students).

As suggested in the studies discussed thus far, there might be different versions and/or perceptions of autonomy depending on the culture and educational settings. If this is the case, from a pedagogical point of view, autonomy support in the Japanese EFL classroom should be altered to fit the students. From a researcher's viewpoint, different perceptions of autonomy

support in different socio-cultural settings might be a cause of the mixed outcome of SDT applied research in the Japanese EFL setting. Therefore, this study will focus mainly on revealing the connection between obtaining a higher degree of discretion and motivating Japanese EFL learners.

The Review of the Widely Used Questionnaire

Hiromori's (2006a, 2006b) questionnaire is by far the most widely used in the Japanese L2 motivation studies based on SDT. It consists of two parts: the English Learning Motivation Scale and the Psychological Needs Scale. The English Learning Motivation Scale is designed to ask participants to indicate their intensity of motivation to learn English. The Psychological Needs Scale asks how much participants feel their basic psychological needs regarding English learning are fulfilled. The most commonly used format is the five-point Likert scale, where participants are asked to respond to statements in terms of the extent to which they agree with them (e.g., strongly agree, strongly disagree).

Table 1 shows the questionnaire items in the Psychological Needs Scale and their characteristics. The letter P in the Characteristic column indicates that the questionnaire item asks for participants' perception, whereas the letter C means that the item asks for the condition of English classes the participants are taking. For example, the first item in the Competence (i.e., the construct to measure the degree to which learners' competence needs are fulfilled) section reads "I am satisfied with my effort in English classes," and a letter P is designated as its characteristic. This means that the item asks for participants' perception (i.e., how much sense of satisfaction the participants feel in their effort in English classes). On the other hand, a letter C is put for the first item in the Autonomy section, "My teacher always decides what to study in the English course." This means the item aims to find out the condition, or state, of the English classroom by asking about the proportion of teacher-made decisions. Some items have P/C as their item characteristics because they are considered to measure both. For example, the first item in Relatedness, "I think I get along with my friends who are in the same English course," asks how participants see (perception) their relationship with others (condition) in their English classes. The two-lettered coding designated for all Relatedness items reflects that the conditions asked in this construct, such as classroom atmosphere or group dynamics condition, can be understood quite subjectively and might be rated differently depending on the participant's

viewpoint. In contrast, the conditions of the Autonomy items, such as whether or not opportunities to have a say are given to the learners, are rated fairly objectively by respondents because judgments are based on the frequency or proportion of student-made decisions in the classroom.

It should be noted that all items used to measure the degree to which learners' autonomy needs are fulfilled ask for the conditions that students are given by the teacher, rather than students' feelings or perceptions on how autonomy is supported by the teacher in the English course. Thus, interpreting the data from these items requires caution because the items are based on the assumption that giving a certain condition (giving choices in this case) to students automatically satisfies their autonomy needs. Indeed, some researchers (e.g. Agawa & Takeuchi, 2016; Iyengar & Lepper, 1999; Littlewood, 1999; Nakata, 2006, 2010) have pointed out that obtaining a choice might not always be cherished by people who are in an East Asian cultural and educational context. Surely Hiromori's (2006a, 2006b) students appreciated gaining greater control over their English learning processes. His questionnaire successfully measured his students' autonomy needs fulfillment because the researcher knew his students well and therefore was able to come up with precise conditions, as articulated in the questionnaire items, to satisfy their needs, which boosted their motivation. On the other hand, some other studies (e.g. Agawa & Takeuchi, 2016; Maekawa & Yashima, 2012; Otoshi & Heffernan, 2011) failed to see the connection between the conditions offered to their learners and their L2 motivation enhancement; this was likely because the conditions did not match their perception of how autonomy should be supported. Thus, with additional autonomy items that ask about the perception of Japanese EFL learners, the questionnaire could represent Japanese EFL learners' autonomy needs satisfaction and motivation more accurately.

Table 1

Items in the Psychological Needs Scale and their Characteristics

Needs Fulfillment	Questionnaire item	Characteristic
Autonomy	My teacher always decides what to study in English classes. (reversed item)	C
	I have freedom of choice on assignments in English classes.	C
	My teacher asks for the opinions of students about the content and/or procedure of classes.	C
	I have opportunities to express my ideas and opinions on English learning.	C
Competence	I am satisfied with my effort in English classes.	P
	I think I can get a good grade in English classes.	P
	I often feel incompetent in English. (reversed item)	P
	I feel I can do well in English classes if I try.	P
Relatedness	I think I get along with my friends who are in the same English course.	P/C
	I think I've been able to work together with my friends on a group activity.	P/C
	I think there is an atmosphere where we learn from each other in English classes.	P/C
	I think I've been able to cooperate in a group activity in the English class.	P/C

Note. C = the item asks the condition of the English classes; P = the item asks participant's feelings/perception. Questionnaire items taken from "*Gaikokugo gakushusya no doukizuke wo takameru riron to jissen [Theory and practice to improve foreign language learners]* " by T. Hiromori, 2006, Tokyo: Taga, p.141, and translated to English by the authors.

Purposes of the Study

The review of the literature shows the need to investigate the causality between autonomy and motivation. In addition, a closer look at the widely used questionnaire suggests the need for modification of the autonomy items. As a step toward amendment, this study aims to specify modification points to the questionnaire by examining the relationship between autonomy and Japanese EFL learners' motivation. The study also aims to confirm the relationship among competence, relatedness, and Japanese EFL learners' motivation.

Method

Participants

Eighteen university students in Japan participated in the interview study after providing written consent. All of them were provided with the background to and summary of the research, possible demands on participants,[2] and the researcher's contact information. They agreed to participate in an interview and to allow the content of their interview to be audio recorded. In an effort to ensure that participants represented the population of Japanese university EFL learners, interviewees were chosen from academically varied universities (i.e., extremely competitive schools: University A, middle-range schools: University B, and easy-to-get-into schools: University C). Their majors also varied (i.e., English, law, Japanese, medicine, and psychology). Reflecting the different degrees of academic and English proficiency demanded by their universities and/or majors, the interviewees' English levels varied as well, with the most proficient student falling in the B2 (Independent User) level of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment (CEFR) and the least falling in the A2 (Basic User) level of CEFR. In seeking participants, the authors asked the candidate students and/or their teachers to inform them of the applicants' level of L2 motivation so that the authors could make sure to interview highly motivated, moderately motivated, and marginally motivated English learners from each level of the universities. Of the 18 participants, nine were males and nine were females. To ensure anonymity, all participants were assigned codes and were referred to by these codes thereafter. The codes indicate participants' university, L2 motivation level, and gender. The first letter in the code (A, B, or C) shows the characteristics of the participant's university; the second one (H, M, or L) illustrates the level of his/her L2 motivation; and the last letter in the parentheses indicates gender (see Table 2).

Table 2
Participants' Characteristics and Their Codes

Motivation	Participant Code		
	University A	University B	University C
High	AH (m)	BH (m)	CH (f)
	AH (f)	BH (f)	CH (m)
Moderate	AM (m)	BM1 (m)	CM1 (f)
	AM (f)	BM2 (m)	CM2 (f)
Low	AL (m)	BL (m)	CL (m)
	AL (f)	BL (f)	CL (f)

Note: A = University A; B = University B; C = University C; H = highly motivated;
M = moderately motivated; L = little motivated; m = male; f = female.

Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the 18 participants to examine the connection between needs fulfillment and motivation. All the interviews were carried out by one of the authors of this paper in participants' native language (i.e., Japanese). Four questions were asked of all participants. The first question was used to gradually introduce the three main topics (i.e., questions 2–4) to the participants, rather than abruptly shifting to narrowly focused points at the very beginning of the interview. The second to fourth questions probed the relationship between L2 motivation and the autonomy needs, competence, and relatedness fulfillment, respectively. If the participants responded to the first question with answers to the questions planned to be asked later, the interviewer did not subsequently ask the question to avoid redundancy. The participants were encouraged to elaborate on their answers with explanations and examples. The translations of the four questions are as follows:

1. What motivates or demotivates you to learn English?
2. When/If you have more choices in English class, how does/will it influence your motivation to learn English?
3. When/If you have a good relationship with your classmates in group work in English class, how does/will it influence your motivation to learn English?

4. When/If you feel competent in English, how does/will it influence your motivation to learn English?

Each interview, which took approximately 30–40 minutes, was administered in a face-to-face manner in a quiet room, and all the contents were audio recorded for later analysis.

Data Analysis

The audio-recorded interview data were transcribed by a professional transcriptionist who was instructed to transcribe the files verbatim. The transcribed data were then coded by classifying elements of the data into three categories: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Coded elements were organized by using the analysis worksheet proposed by modified grounded theory (Kinoshita, 2003) where the first author of this paper added her interpretation to the variations. Following Seale (1999), her coding and interpretations were returned to the informants for member validation (i.e., participants checked that the researcher's coding and interpretations accurately represented what they meant in the interview). After going through the interactive process, the excerpts were translated into English for result presentation. The first author of this paper translated the excerpts; the translation was then checked by a native speaker of English who had basic knowledge of SLA and the Japanese language. In the process of translation, it became clear that some implicit information given in Japanese needed to be articulated in the English version. This was mainly due to the structural feature of the Japanese language where a speaker often omitted the subject, object, and/or another part of a sentence. In order to obtain message clarity and flow in the English version, some supplementation was given, which is notified with parentheses at the beginning and end of the statements.

Results and Discussion

Overall Findings

The interview results showed that (1) the fulfillment of autonomy needs, which has been understood as giving freedom of choice to students, could motivate some L2 learners whereas it

could demotivate other students; (2) a good relationship with the teacher might motivate learners, and a good relationship with other classmates could have a positive or marginal impact on L2 motivation, depending on the learner; and (3) competence needs satisfaction is most likely to motivate Japanese EFL learners.

The following presentation of the interview study's main results match the motivational factors expressed in the interviews to their corresponding psychological needs in SDT. The authors then add their interpretations to the excerpts that have been validated by respondents. Previous studies are referred to in the discussion where relevant.

Autonomy Needs Fulfillment and Motivation

Positive impact of giving choices on L2 motivation. Some interviewees expressed positive attitudes toward more discretion being given in their English classes:

[AH(f)]: I think it is quite difficult to match what the teacher would like us to do and what students would like to do. Then if the teacher and students can decide what to do in class by, for example, the teacher giving us some suggestions which we students can choose from, students' motivation will probably increase.

[BL(m)]: Everyone would agree that people make better progress when they are doing what they like. So I think it's better if we can learn about what we are interested in using English. It's better than when we do what is decided (by someone else).

[CL(f)]: (My motivation) will go up (if I'm given choices) because when I choose a task by myself, I know why I am doing it. Then I will take responsibility for the outcome.

AH, BL, and CL explained that, by being involved in decision making, they can engage in English learning tasks that are matched to their values and interests. To them, obtaining the freedom of choice enables them to work on tasks that they understand and accept their values.

Negative impact of giving choices on L2 motivation. Some informants responded negatively to the idea of English teachers letting students make their own choices when learning English:

[AM(f)]: I'm not the kind of person who would like to come up with some kind of idea by myself. I feel more motivated when I'm given a task by the teacher. If I am told to think (what I should do to learn English), I will feel it is too much hassle.

[CM1(f)]: If the teacher asks us how and what we want to learn, I won't be able to come up with an idea because I don't even know much about the subject matter.

AM is satisfied with and motivated by the condition where choices are made by the teacher. She does not like to make choices and feels it is bothersome when she is told to do so. In her case, making a choice is something she would do when it is imposed. CM1 does not feel competent enough to make choices regarding English learning. Similar to CM1, AL feels it difficult to make his own choices to successfully improve his English grade. He does not believe that being able to make his own choice is a condition to enhance his English learning motivation; rather, the condition is likely to lower his motivation. He explicitly explained why he would feel that way by comparing mathematics, which he is very good at, and English, which he does not feel very competent in:

[AL(m)]: Math has a limited number of things to remember... English doesn't work that way. The grammar changes over time, some verbs are irregular, and there are countless numbers of words to remember. It would be painful to decide what to study myself, because there's no clear line between what I must remember and what I don't have to. The first step, deciding what I need to cover, is a pain already.

To CM1 and AL, making choices in English learning is something that would be forced by others. Uebuchi (2004) pointed out that being given autonomy could be perceived differently by the individual, depending on his/her sense of competence. He acknowledged that autonomy support means - in a nutshell - giving a choice. However, he argued that, if an individual lacks a certain level of perceived competence, being given a choice can be understood as being forced to make a choice. This suggests that some Japanese students would not feel that their autonomy was being supported by simply being given a choice. Rather, they might appreciate and accept

choices made by others. One of the interviewees repeatedly expressed his preference for teacher instructions to freedom of choice:

[BH(m)]: I want the teacher to set a goal for us so that I can push myself to achieve that. I'd like the teacher to show small steps to get to the goal.

[BH(m)]: I get more motivated when everything that will be covered in class is decided (by the teacher). If I'm told I can do whatever I want, I'll lose my competitive mind completely and I tend to think like "working this much is enough, because I'm told I can work at my own pace" or "I can work slower today because I didn't do my homework." Then my study workload will decrease rapidly.

It has been clearly shown that some Japanese EFL learners do not value having their own choices about English learning and rather appreciate choices made by the teacher. This seems to suggest a gap between what SDT postulates and the phenomena observed in the Japanese EFL context. However, before hastily denying the theory, the following two points should be reconsidered: (1) the original definition of autonomy proposed in SDT (e.g., Deci & Ryan, 2002) and (2) how the concept of SDT's autonomy is interpreted in the Japanese EFL settings.

As for the first point, it must be noted that, in discussing what autonomy entails, Deci and Ryan (2002) did not exclude actions influenced by others:

When autonomous, individuals experience their behavior as an expression of the self, such that, even when actions are influenced by outside sources, the actors concur with those influences, feeling both initiative and value with regard to them. (p. 8)

Following the above definition, as long as students understand and accept the value, the teacher making choices for them does not contradict autonomy support. In fact, having students make choices when they do not understand the rationale might be considered to be discouraging their autonomy. This brings up the second point: how the SDT's definition of autonomy is applied in the Japanese EFL setting. As the authors mentioned in the Background of the Study section, the

needs for autonomy are interpreted as the needs for determining their actions themselves and for taking responsibility for their own studies. Reflecting the definition, the most commonly used questionnaire in the EFL setting is designed to measure autonomy needs fulfillment exclusively by the degree of freedom of choice students are given. This raises a serious question of the instrument's validity. The redefinition of the autonomy needs in the Japanese EFL setting and amendment of the questionnaire items based on the redefinition should be carried out.

Suggested modification for the current questionnaire. The preceding discussion on autonomy needs fulfillment and motivation suggests the need to redefine autonomy needs in the Japanese EFL setting and the amendment of questionnaire items according to the redefinition. As the analysis of the interview data revealed, although some Japanese EFL learners might be motivated by having greater learner discretion in English classes, others might lose their motivation. For those who lose their L2 motivation, being given choices does not support their autonomy needs as they do not see the rationale or value of making choices for their English learning. Therefore, the revised definition should remove choice as the key concept and should not exclude influence by others. As students' autonomy is supported as long as they understand and accept the value of other-made choices, the revised definition of autonomy should be learners' desire to engage in tasks and activities for which they appreciate and accept the values.

Regarding a questionnaire for future studies, it should not include items to ask the degree of freedom that students are given because such items do not necessarily gauge their autonomy needs fulfillment. Instead, there need to be new items to measure how much students understand and accept the value of English learning tasks in which they engage, which reflects the redefinition of autonomy needs.

Relatedness Needs Fulfillment and Motivation

Impact of the teacher–student relationship on learner motivation. The first question, which asked about participants' source of L2 motivation in general, revealed that students' relationships with their teachers influenced learner motivation:

[AH(f)]: I think the impact from my English teachers in junior and senior high school was big. The English teachers, both Japanese and non-Japanese, talked to me more actively than teachers of other subjects. That was maybe because I kind of liked English

and often asked the teachers questions. Then the teachers treated me kindly by, for example, giving me English learning materials. I think the junior and senior high school teachers who paid me that kind of attention influenced me a lot. If I had met less friendly teachers, I wouldn't have liked English so much.

[AL(f)]: My motivation to learn English was the highest when I was a freshman. That might be because the teacher was charismatic and I admired her, so I didn't want her to think I was no good.

In some cases, a teacher could negatively influence students' motivation:

[BM(m)]: Teachers have an influence on students' motivation for sure. Students sometimes lose motivation to study because of a teacher.

Needs for relatedness in the Japanese EFL setting are commonly understood as wanting to connect and engage in English learning activities cooperatively with other classmates and the teacher. Dei's (2011) study endorsed the value of the teacher–student relationship in the English classroom, where he found a medium correlation ($r = .37$) between the intrinsic motivation of Japanese EFL learners and the need for relatedness with the teacher. In his study, the teacher paid attention to each and every learner, making time for individual guidance and providing positive and supportive feedback on students' assignments. AH's comments in this study confirm that the teacher's attention and encouragement to students help increase L2 learner motivation.

Impact of the relationship among classmates on L2 motivation. A good relationship with other classmates can have a positive impact on L2 motivation:

[CL(f)]: You can't learn English by studying it alone. I think learning it through group work is more effective.
[Interviewer]: Do you think your motivation to learn in an English class will increase if you get along with your group mates?
[CL(f)]: Yes, I think so. If the group members are not bad, I would feel like learning English more.

[CH(m)]: If we get to know each other well—for example, if I find a classmate has the same hobby as me through an activity in an English class, and we get closer out of class through the hobby—then I will probably enjoy studying English with that friend as well.

CH also mentioned the effectiveness of learning English with other students.

[CH(m)]: When I study English with my fellow students, we discuss the meaning of parts of our task. When my friend explains something to me, I understand it better. In that way, learning with friends has a kind of synergetic effect compared with studying alone.

CL and CH seem to enjoy learning English with someone with whom they get along well. To them, studying with friends might be a pleasant activity, thereby improving their L2 motivation. Another aspect worth mentioning here is that, when they have an opportunity to work cooperatively with others, it leads to successful learning, which in turn improves their motivation.

Some other students are more focused on the effectiveness of working in a successful group than for the pleasure of it:

[Interviewer]: Do you think having a good relationship with other group members might improve your motivation to learn English?
[BL(m)]: Yes, it has a pretty good chance (of motivation improvement). (In preparation of a group presentation,) we need to have a deep understanding of English. So, in the process of trying to understand English better, we tend to get interested in the language.
[Interviewer]: Do you mean you might get interested in the language because you and your group members have a good relationship and help each other prepare the presentation?
[BL(m)]: That's right.

Therefore, having a positive relationship among classmates might improve some EFL learners' motivation. The effects are twofold. First, L2 motivation of some learners might be increased through a good relationship with other classmates. Second, motivation to learn English

might be enhanced through learning success, which is the by-product of a good member relationship.

However, for some other EFL learners, a good relationship with other classmates might have little impact on their motivation:

[AM(m)]: I think I put my efforts into English learning when I work with friends or people who I enjoy working with. But, well, when a task is set, I work on it regardless of whether I am alone or with other people.

[Interviewer]: A relationship with other classmates might not influence your motivation?

[AM(m)]: I think a good relationship in a group has a lot to do with working efficiency, but to me, it might have little to do with my motivation to learn English.

[AL(m)]: (When I was in high school,) I made myself learn English words when I was on the train. But some people would like to learn words at their desk at home. If I work with that kind of person in a group, we might not be able to work as a good team.

[Interviewer]: Do you mean your learning styles are different?

[AL(m)]: Yes.

It is clear that both AM and AL have already developed their own learning styles, which involve working alone. It should also be noted that both of them are students at an exclusive university and they are likely quite confident with their learning styles. For such students, having a good relationship with others does not seem to be a very efficient way to learn something and, thus, does not influence their motivation to learn English.

Suggested addition to the current questionnaire. The original purpose of probing the link between the relatedness needs satisfaction and L2 motivation was to confirm the causality between the two. However, the results of the current study, which are also supported by Dei's (2011) study, suggested that a good teacher–student relationship might contribute to enhancing Japanese EFL learners' motivation. As the widely used questionnaire includes only items that concern relationships among students, the addition of items to measure the teacher–student relationship is called for. It has been shown in the preceding discussion that a teacher's attention,

support, and encouragement of individual learners can successfully improve the teacher–student relationship; therefore, questions to gauge learners' perception of these factors should be added.

Competence Needs Fulfillment and Motivation

The interview results confirmed that competence needs satisfaction can be a powerful motivator of Japanese EFL learners:

[AH(f)]: (I came to like English because,) compared with other subjects like math and science, I was clearly better at English.

[AH(f)]: Sometimes I get interested in a subject matter a bit and I get into studying it for a while. Then I find my grade in the subject has gone up. I like the subject more because it is interesting and my grade goes up when I study it. I think this is the cycle I have when I come to like a subject.

[CH(m)]: (What is important is) a sense of achievement. For example, if I read a passage in English and if I understand the meaning well, I would feel a sense of achievement. If there are questions related to the passage and if I can answer them correctly, I would feel even happier. In such cases, I would feel like continuing my English study.

[CM(f)]: When I can do (a task) successfully, I begin to like the course itself. Once I grasp the technique to do well in the course, I like to be a bit creative and try a slightly different technique at the next opportunity.

The other side of the picture is that, when learners feel less competent in English - for instance, they feel that they are falling behind in class or are overwhelmed by the amount of work - they are more likely to begin disliking English:

[AL(m)]: (As we advanced to higher grades, English) questions got more difficult and my grades went down. Then I tended to pay more attention to other subjects that I was good at and enjoyed studying those subjects rather than English. At high school, the

amount of things that we needed to remember increased dramatically… The amount was outrageous, and I felt it was basically impossible (to remember all of them).

[BM(m)]: My motivation to work on English goes down when I can't read some words that I don't know and, in addition to that, I find I don't understand some grammar items in the passage.

[CL(f)]: I studied little in every English class and I increasingly understood less, and then I started to hate English.

As the results of the interviews clearly demonstrate, the satisfaction of competence needs help increase Japanese university students' motivation to learn English. This finding is in line with SDT and previous studies (e.g., Agawa & Takeuchi, 2016; Dei, 2011; Hiromori, 2006a; 2006b), confirming the importance of students' competence needs satisfaction in English classes.

Conclusions

This study aimed to re-examine the causality between fulfilling EFL learners' needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness. The other purpose of the study was to specify modification points to the commonly used questionnaire in the Japanese EFL setting.

The results of this interview study present some interesting points. First, the analysis of the interview data revealed that, whereas some Japanese EFL learners might be motivated by obtaining greater learner discretion in English classes, others might lose their motivation. For those who would lose their L2 motivation, being given choices does not support their autonomy needs because they do not see the rationale or value of making choices for their English learning. This calls for the redefinition of autonomy needs in the Japanese EFL setting and the amendment of questionnaire items according to the redefinition.

Second, it was found that a good teacher–student relationship might contribute to enhancing learner motivation. Furthermore, whereas some students can be motivated by being connected to other classmates, other students do not see the rationale or have the desire to work

with others in English classes. As the current widely used questionnaire does not include items asking how learners perceive their relationship with their teacher, the addition of items to gauge the teacher–student relationship is suggested.

Finally, it was confirmed that the satisfaction of competence needs could function as a strong motivator of Japanese university EFL students.

Based on the suggestions made in this study, the questionnaire should be modified. Then, using the amended questionnaire, one can proceed to validate SDT in the Japanese EFL contexts. A similar procedure should be undertaken in different contexts to test the versatility of the amended questionnaire and SDT. Upon verification of the theory, pedagogical implications for enhancing L2 learners' motivation could be proposed, which can be examined in an actual classroom. Although taking all these steps sounds like a lot of work, this study could serve as a concrete step toward expanding the opportunity to improve L2 learners in various settings.

Notes

[1] GFI = .75, AGFI = .70, CFI = .82, RMSEA = .90. An adequate model fit is indicated by the values of GFI $\geq$ .90, AGFI $\geq$ .90, CFI $\geq$ .90, and RMSEA $\leq$ .10.

[2] Time demands and possible discomfort that might be caused in the interview were outlined.

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