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Promoting Student Motivation in Language Learning: A Mixed-Methods Study

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
	This study explores strategies for enhancing student motivation in language learning through a mixed-methods approach. Drawing on the concept of stimulating learner motivation, a Self-Study Project was implemented in a Japanese language course at the University of Florida. Survey results revealed a statistically significant increase in motivation following targeted interventions. A thematic analysis of students' written feedback further illuminated key factors contributing to this improvement. The findings suggest that specific pedagogical approaches can significantly impact student motivation, offering important implications not only for language teachers but also for educators across various disciplines. **Keywords:** L2-classroom anxiety, language learning, learner motivation, mixed-methods study, self-study.

INTRODUCTION

Motivation is a cornerstone of psychology, playing a pivotal role in human behavior and cognition. In language education, it is often cited by both teachers and learners as a key determinant of success or failure. Dörnyei (2005) emphasizes that motivation serves as the primary impetus for initiating second or foreign language (L2) learning and as the driving force sustaining the often-arduous learning process. Without sufficient motivation, even the most talented individuals struggle to achieve long-term goals, and high-quality teaching or curricula alone cannot guarantee student success.

Traditionally, motivational psychologists focused on defining motivation rather than applying this knowledge to classroom settings (Guilloteaux & Dörnyei, 2008). However, recent research has shifted toward understanding its pedagogical implications, conceptualizing motivational strategies to enhance learning outcomes (Brophy, 2004; Dörnyei, 2001, 2006). This shift has led to studies investigating the application of motivational theories in real classroom environments. For instance, Guilloteaux and Dörnyei (2008) conducted a large-scale study in South Korea involving over 1,300 EFL learners across 40 classrooms. Their findings demonstrated a significant link between teachers' use of motivational strategies and increased student motivation, highlighting the practical importance of motivation research. Building on this growing body of research, recent studies have begun to examine not only external teaching strategies but also internal learner factors—particularly how learners' perceptions of self influence their motivation. This shift has paved the way for theoretical models like the L2 Motivational Self System, which will be explored in the following section.

The Concept of Self and the L2 Motivational Self System in Language Learning Motivation

The notion of self has long been recognized in psychology, but it was not until the early twenty-first century that applied linguists began integrating self-related theories into language learning motivation research. Dörnyei (2005, 2009) plays a crucial role in strengthening this connection, leading to the development of the L2 Motivational Self System (L2MSS). This model consists of three key components: the Ideal L2 Self, the Ought-to L2 Self, and the L2 Learning Experience.

Ideal L2 Self

The Ideal L2 Self represents a learner's vision of themselves as a proficient L2 user. If a student has a compelling vision of their future self-using the language (e.g., an English-medium instruction student aspiring to become a global business leader), this self-image serves as a strong motivational guide. Research has shown that individuals with a vivid and accessible ideal L2 self are more likely to exert sustained effort to bridge the gap between their current and desired proficiency levels (Papi, 2010). This self-concept fosters intrinsic motivation, encouraging learners to engage with the language for personal growth rather than external rewards (Taguchi et al., 2009; Ryan, 2009).

However, an Ideal L2 Self alone does not guarantee motivation unless learners perceive a clear pathway to achieving their goals. If students lack access to resources or feel their ideal self is unattainable, their motivation may wane (Papi, 2010). Additionally, large discrepancies between a learner's actual and ideal self can lead to anxiety, particularly when students internalize an overly ambitious or unrealistic vision of their future selves (Papi, 2010).

Ought-to L2 Self

The Ought-to L2 Self encompasses the attributes a learner believes they should possess to meet external expectations and avoid negative consequences. This dimension is closely tied to social pressure, such as family or career-related demands. For example, students who perceive learning an L2 as an obligation for career advancement or parental expectations may be highly motivated to succeed (Papi, 2010). This type of motivation is particularly useful in structured academic settings, where external expectations play a crucial role in helping learners maintain perseverance when intrinsic motivation fluctuates.

Despite its benefits, an overreliance on external expectations can contribute to heightened anxiety and stress. Research indicates that learners motivated by external pressures tend to experience elevated levels of L2 anxiety, which may negatively impact performance and overall engagement (Gregersen & Horwitz, 2002; Papi, 2010). The strong association between the Ought-to Self and anxiety suggests that motivation based purely on external pressures may not be sustainable in the long run.

L2 Learning Experience

The L2 Learning Experience encompasses real-life engagement with language learning, making it a crucial factor in sustaining motivation. Classroom interactions, teaching methods, and institutional policies shape this dimension, influencing how learners perceive and engage with the learning process. Studies have consistently found that the L2 Learning Experience is a strong predictor of intended learning effort and L2 achievement (Dörnyei, 2019).

Positive learning experiences, such as engaging instruction, supportive peers, and meaningful activities, can reinforce motivation and contribute to a long-term commitment to language learning (Csizér & Kormos, 2009; Taguchi et al., 2009). Conversely, negative experiences—such as ineffective teaching methods, poor classroom dynamics, or negative feedback—may discourage learners and lead them to associate language learning with stress (Papi, 2010). Dörnyei and Csizér (2016) found that, across various learning contexts, the L2 Learning Experience had a greater influence on predicting learning effort than the Ideal L2 Self, underscoring its importance in sustaining motivation.

Advantages and Limitations of the L2 Motivational Self System

The L2 Motivational Self System provides a comprehensive framework for understanding the complex interplay of internal and external factors in language learning motivation. While the Ideal L2 Self fosters intrinsic motivation and goal-setting, its effectiveness depends on the learner's ability to envision attainable future selves. The Ought-to L2 Self can drive effort through external expectations but may lead to anxiety if motivation is based purely on pressure from others. Meanwhile, the L2 Learning Experience plays a central role in shaping motivation, with positive engagement reinforcing sustained effort and negative experiences posing risks to long-term motivation.

Given these dynamics, it is essential to create balanced and supportive language-learning environments that cultivate both self-driven and externally reinforced motivation while ensuring learners have access to positive and meaningful learning experiences. While the L2MSS has been widely explored in theoretical and survey-based research, there remains a need for empirical classroom-based studies that examine how specific pedagogical interventions influence motivation in practice—particularly in less commonly taught languages such as Japanese. By investigating how

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students respond to structured motivational strategies in real classroom settings, researchers can better understand the practical application of motivation theories. Such studies can also provide language instructors with actionable insights into how to design learning environments that support sustained learner engagement.

This study aims to address this gap by investigating the implementation of a Self-Study Project in a Japanese language course at the University of Florida. It explores how the project affects learners' motivation, their perceived skill development, and their reflections on its benefits and challenges.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

In Fall 2024, a new project was introduced in the Japanese language course at the University of Florida. This initiative, called the Self-Study Project, requires students to create a Japanese-language homepage (e.g., using WordPress, Wix.com, etc.) for self-study purposes. The objective is to encourage students to explore a wide range of Japanese learning resources, including anime, manga, online news, insights into Japanese culture, and traditional events in Japan. As part of this biweekly project, students are required to post on their Japanese blog every other Friday throughout the Fall 2024 semester. The present study investigates the following research questions:

1. How does the implementation of the Self-Study Project affect learners' motivation?

2. Which language skills (e.g., writing, listening) do learners perceive to have improved?

3. What feedback do learners provide regarding the advantages and disadvantages of the Self-Study Project?

METHODOLOGY

To investigate the impact of the Self-Study Project on learners' motivation and perceived language development, a mixed-methods research design was employed. This approach integrates both quantitative and qualitative data to offer a comprehensive understanding of students' experiences and outcomes throughout the Fall 2024 semester.

Participants: 24 students participated in the study (Female = 8; Prefer not to say = 2).

Quantitative Data Collection: Motivation levels were assessed using pre- and post-intervention surveys administered in August 2024 and December 2024, respectively. The instrument used was the Student Motivational State Questionnaire (Guilloteaux & Dörnyei, 2008, See Appendix).

Qualitative Data Collection: After the intervention, students completed written surveys designed to capture their personal reflections and insights regarding the project.

Intervention: Students engaged in a biweekly project in which they posted on their Japanese blog every other Friday throughout the Fall 2024 semester, resulting in a total of seven posts.

Data Analysis:

- Quantitative Analysis: Statistical analysis was conducted using R, a widely used software for statistical computing and graphics. Pre- and post-intervention survey data were analyzed using paired t-tests to evaluate changes in motivation levels. Additionally, Cohen's d was calculated to determine the effect size.

- Qualitative Analysis: A systematic approach was adopted for coding and analyzing the qualitative data. Reflexive thematic analysis, grounded in a qualitative paradigm, was employed to identify recurring themes across student responses. This method, known for its theoretical flexibility, is particularly well-suited for a wide range of qualitative data types and research designs, including mixed-methods studies (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

QUANTITATIVE RESULTS

A series of paired t-tests were conducted to assess statistically significant changes in student motivation before and after the implementation of the Self-Study Project. The key findings are as follows:

Overall Motivation

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- Before Mean: 3.71

- After Mean: 3.96

- *t*-statistic: 3.88

- *p*-value: .00076 (statistically significant)

- Cohen's *d*: .79 (strong effect size)

Overview of Results

The quantitative analysis of the Self-Study Project revealed a statistically significant increase in student motivation, with mean scores rising from 3.71 to 3.96 (t = 3.88, p = .00076). The effect size (Cohen's d = .79) indicates a strong impact. Several individual survey items reflected notable gains in motivation and confidence, suggesting that the project effectively enhanced students' engagement and sense of autonomy. However, some items—such as "I wish we had more Japanese lessons" and "I feel more nervous in Japanese class"—did not show significant changes, indicating that the improvement in motivation was not universal but rather concentrated in specific aspects of the learning experience. These findings suggest that while the project successfully fostered self-directed learning, further refinements may be needed to address broader classroom-related factors such as enjoyment and anxiety.

QUALITATIVE RESULTS

Following Braun and Clarke's (2022) framework, five key themes were identified from the qualitative data. Overall, the Self-Study Project demonstrated clear benefits in increasing student motivation, enhancing vocabulary acquisition, and fostering cultural understanding. However, challenges related to time management and self-discipline emerged, which could impact learning outcomes. To address these challenges, future iterations of the project could incorporate structured milestones or periodic check-ins to support students who struggle with independent learning. Below are the five identified themes, supported by student quotes.

Autonomy and Motivation

One of the most significant advantages of the Self-Study Project was the autonomy it provided, allowing students to choose topics of personal interest. Many students reported that this sense of freedom significantly enhanced their motivation to engage with the material. This flexibility contributed to sustained engagement, as students were more inclined to complete assignments enthusiastically rather than out of obligation.

In addition to increasing motivation, students reflected on how autonomy transformed the project into a personalized learning journey. One respondent noted, "I never want to study, even for exams. But I was motivated to write about my interests," underscoring the value of internal drive when learners are given the opportunity to direct their focus. Another student offered advice for future participants: "Don't hesitate to do it on something you like, or even something you want to like," reinforcing that autonomy encourages students to explore not only what they already enjoy but also what they hope to learn more about. The recurring theme of freedom and self-direction suggests that motivation was not merely a byproduct but a core outcome of the project's design.

"It gave us a chance to explore or talk about aspects of Japanese language/culture that we otherwise wouldn't be able to during class. It also encouraged us to explore new grammar and vocabulary on our own."

"I think the freedom to research and study any topic was extremely beneficial. Whether it was a personal topic like favorite foods or a historical topic about a castle, the Self-Study Project was useful in advancing my understanding of Japanese."

Expansion of Vocabulary and Grammar Knowledge

Another recurring theme was the opportunity to expand beyond textbook-based learning. Many students noted that the project helped them acquire new vocabulary and grammar structures that were not part of their regular curriculum. This aspect of the project was particularly beneficial for students seeking to tailor their learning to personal goals, such as improving conversational fluency in specific contexts.

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Student reflections also emphasized how the creative and exploratory nature of the assignments made vocabulary and grammar acquisition feel more natural. One student commented, "Don't be afraid to look up new words or grammar to fit what you want to say," pointing to the value of applying knowledge in meaningful contexts. Another participant suggested, "Maybe having to implement a new grammar point or kanji you found each week," revealing a student-initiated desire for scaffolding that encourages continual expansion of linguistic repertoire. These insights suggest that when learners have both freedom and responsibility, they take active steps to personalize and deepen their language proficiency.

"The Self-Study Project allows us to use Japanese in a context we are interested in. We can also learn new grammar and vocabulary we might need to express ideas."

"This project helps us to learn more by forcing us to write outside of the topics associated with Genki Textbook chapters. Thus, we learn more vocabulary and kanji that are relevant to how we want to speak Japanese."

Deeper Cultural Understanding

The Self-Study Project encouraged students to engage with Japanese culture and history on a deeper level. Through independent research, students gained meaningful cultural insights that may not have been covered in class. By embedding language learning within real-world cultural contexts, this project reinforced authentic engagement with Japanese.

In particular, students expressed that the open-ended nature of the project enabled them to approach culture from a personalized and curious perspective. Rather than being limited to textbook depictions or classroom lectures, learners conducted research that aligned with their interests—whether historical, regional, or pop-cultural. The format invited them to explore Japan not just as a language environment but as a cultural world to enter and reflect upon. One student wrote that it helped them "talk about aspects of Japanese culture we wouldn't be able to during class," illustrating how the self-study component filled a critical gap in cultural immersion.

"I think that the Self-Study Project allowed us to engage with Japanese culture in a way that felt more natural and meaningful to us."

"Being able to talk about whatever I wanted while also doing research on my topics every week was enjoyable."

Challenges in Time Management

Despite its benefits, the Self-Study Project posed challenges in time management. Students reported difficulties balancing the project with other coursework, particularly when multiple deadlines coincided. While self-paced learning was beneficial for many, these findings suggest that structured checkpoints could help students better manage their workload.

Many students identified procrastination as a common pitfall, recommending time management as essential advice for future learners. One respondent suggested, "Plan your ideas (and their formats) well in advance and don't procrastinate," while another reflected, "Do not procrastinate as it will lessen your enjoyment and growth." These sentiments underscore the importance of executive functioning in independent projects. Students also offered concrete improvement ideas—such as adjusting the timing of peer comments—indicating a desire for more manageable pacing and clearer alignment between posting and feedback cycles.

"Especially when we had to work on presentations or the skit at the same time, it was difficult to do the self-study post well because we had to balance several Japanese projects with other classes."

"If you procrastinate, it can be a little time-consuming to complete by the deadline. But that is an issue independent of the assignment itself and more dependent on the student."

Variability in Learning Outcomes

Although many students found the project engaging, some expressed concerns that learning outcomes varied depending on individual motivation. Without strong personal interest, it was easy to do the bare minimum rather than actively challenge oneself.

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Student feedback further confirmed that the project's open structure produced a range of outcomes shaped by learners' initiative and time management. As one student put it, "If you procrastinate… that is more dependent on the student," revealing how much the success of the project hinged on self-discipline. Another noted, "Don't procrastinate on working on your posts early," suggesting that engagement could diminish quickly if learners didn't plan ahead. These findings suggest that while autonomy offers opportunities for deep learning, it also presents risks of disengagement for students who lack intrinsic motivation or time-management skills. Future iterations of the project may benefit from additional support systems—such as check-in deadlines or guided reflection prompts—to ensure more consistent engagement across student profiles.

"The only disadvantage I can think of is that if you don't care about the project, it can become very easy to do the bare minimum and not try."
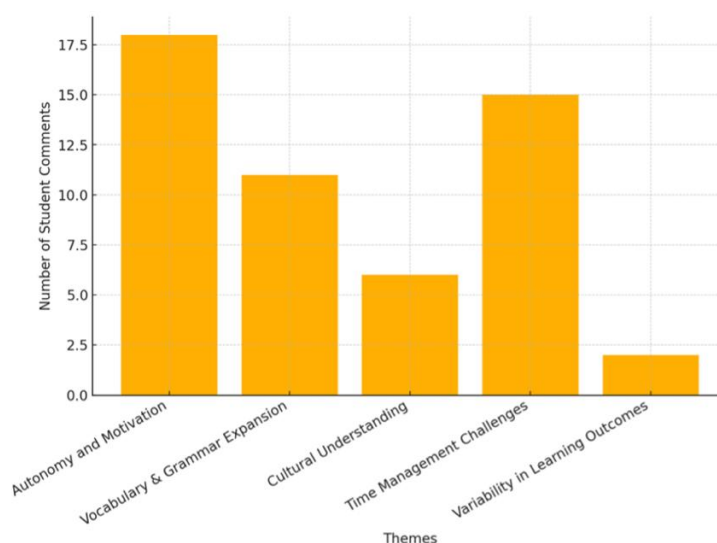

Figure 1. Distribution of student comments across themes

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study align closely with Dörnyei's (2005) L2 Motivational Self System (L2MSS), particularly in highlighting the role of the L2 Learning Experience as a powerful influence on student motivation. As Dörnyei (2019) emphasized, the quality of engagement with learning tasks plays a central role in sustaining motivation and shaping learner identity. The Self-Study Project offered students a high degree of autonomy and personalization, which many described as "enjoyable," "freeing," and "motivating." These affective responses illustrate how meaningful, self-directed tasks can enhance the L2 Learning Experience, supporting both engagement and persistence.

However, while students reported increased motivation, this study did not directly assess gains in linguistic proficiency. As Moskovsky et al. (2016) noted, motivational constructs such as the Ideal L2 Self and L2 Learning Experience are often predictive of learning effort but do not necessarily correlate with measurable language achievement. This tension was also evident in the current study, where some students demonstrated deep engagement and linguistic growth, while others admitted to doing "the bare minimum." Such variability in outcomes suggests that motivation alone is insufficient to ensure consistent progress; it must be paired with structured opportunities for reflection, feedback, and guided application.

This complexity resonates with Papi's (2010) assertion that motivational benefits can be offset by increased anxiety when learners are left to navigate autonomy without adequate support. While many students appreciated the flexibility of the Self-Study Project, others reported stress related to workload and time management, particularly when juggling other assignments. These findings indicate that for self-regulated learning to be effective, it must include scaffolding mechanisms that support executive functioning and emotional well-being. Clear expectations,

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regular check-ins, and time-management guidance may help students balance independence with accountability, leading to both greater motivation and better outcomes.

Finally, the incorporation of culturally rich materials—such as anime, history, cuisine, and festivals—was frequently cited by students as a source of enjoyment and deeper understanding. This echoes existing scholarship on the motivational power of culturally authentic content (Ushioda, 2011), which fosters relevance and personal connection. The ability to integrate linguistic and cultural learning in personally meaningful ways is a key strength of self-directed projects and reinforces the importance of learner-centered design in language pedagogy.

CONCLUSION AND FURTHER RESEARCH

This study demonstrates that self-directed learning initiatives, when thoughtfully designed, can significantly enhance student motivation, vocabulary acquisition, grammatical knowledge, and cultural awareness. By allowing learners to explore topics of personal interest and apply language in real-world contexts, the Self-Study Project fostered sustained engagement and deeper investment in the learning process. Many students reported enjoying the creative freedom and noted that the project helped them go beyond textbook material to explore grammar and vocabulary relevant to their personal goals.

Nevertheless, the project also revealed challenges—particularly in time management and self-discipline—that suggest the need for a more balanced approach. While autonomy can empower learners, some students struggled to meet expectations without more structured guidance. Incorporating scaffolding elements such as scheduled milestones, more guided or corrective feedback from the instructor, or optional mentorship could provide helpful frameworks for those who need additional support. These enhancements could help reduce stress, increase accountability, and improve consistency across student outcomes.

Future research should continue to explore the interplay between motivation, self-regulation, and language proficiency. While this study confirms the motivational value of self-study models, the lack of direct proficiency measures limits the ability to make claims about long-term language development. Longitudinal studies that track both motivation and language growth over time would be valuable in assessing the sustained impact of autonomous learning. Furthermore, given the increasing reliance on digital tools for independent learning, it would be useful to examine how online platforms either facilitate or complicate self-directed projects. A mixed-methods approach that incorporates surveys, interviews, and proficiency assessments could offer a more holistic picture of how motivation translates—or fails to translate—into tangible language gains.

Appendix

Student Motivational State Questionnaire

Reference: Guilloteaux, M. J., & Dörnyei, Z. (2008)

Likert-type scale 1 (Strongly disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree)

Note: Some items have been adapted to fit the context of Japanese language learners

Attitudes Toward the Course (9 items)

- I wish we had more Japanese lessons at school this semester.

- I like Japanese lessons this semester.

- Japanese is one of my favorite subjects at school this semester.

- When the Japanese lesson ends, I often wish it could continue.

- I want to work hard in Japanese lessons to make my teacher happy.

- I enjoy my Japanese lessons this semester because what we do is neither too hard nor too easy.

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- I would rather spend time on subjects other than Japanese. (REVERSED)

- Learning Japanese at school is a burden for me this semester. (REVERSED)

- In Japanese lessons this semester, we are learning things that will be useful in the future.

Linguistic Self-Confidence (8 items)

- I feel I am making progress in Japanese this semester.

- I believe I will receive good grades in Japanese this semester.

- I often experience a feeling of success in my Japanese lessons this semester.

- I am sure that one day I will be able to speak Japanese.

- In Japanese lessons this semester, I usually understand what to do and how to do it.

- This semester, I think I am good at learning Japanese.

- I am worried about my ability to do well in Japanese this semester. (REVERSED)

- I often volunteer to do speaking presentations in Japanese lessons.

L2-Classroom Anxiety (3 items)

- I get very worried if I make mistakes during Japanese lessons this semester.

- I am afraid that my classmates will laugh at me when I have to speak in Japanese lessons.

- I feel more nervous in Japanese class this semester than in my other classes.

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