

The Effects of Self-Selected Topics on Learners' Intrinsic Motivation to Speak English as a Foreign Language

آثار الموضوعات المختارة ذاتيا على الدوافع الذاتية للمتعلمين للتحدث باللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية

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Abstract This study examines the effects of self-selected topics on students' intrinsic motivation to speak English as a foreign language. Participants in this study were 26 students enrolled at the department of English in Blida2 University, Algeria. Following the mixed-methods approach, the study uses an adapted version of Deci and Ryan (2010) Intrinsic Motivation Inventory (IMI) and a structured-interview. The IMI was distributed twice: the first time was after the assigned-topics sessions and the second was after the self-selected topics activity. To understand the IMI results, a structured-interview was conducted with 10 participants. The study's results revealed that when the participants were allowed to select the topics, their IM to speak English was higher compared to when the researchers assigned them topics.

Keywords IM; EFL Speaking; Self-Selected Topics.

ملخص تتناول هذه الدراسة آثار الاختيار الذاتي للمواضيع على دافعية الطلبة الجوهرية للتحدث باللغة الإنجليزية. شارك في الدراسة 26 طالب وطالبة من قسم اللغة الإنجليزية بجامعة البليدة2، الجزائر. لقد تم الاعتماد في هذه الدراسة على منهج الأساليب المختلطة وذلك باستعمال نسخة معدلة من استبيان ديسي وريان (2010) لجرد الدافعية الجوهرية ومقابلة شفوية. لقد تم توزيع الاستبيان مرتين: الأولى بعد تجربة المواضيع المنتقاة من طرف الباحثان والثانية بعد تجربة اختيار المواضيع من طرف الطلبة أنفسهم. بغرض الفهم الجيد لنتائج الاستبيانين، قامت الباحثان بإجراء مقابلة شفوية مع مجموعة من الطلبة المشاركين في البحث. قد بينت نتائج البحث ارتفاع في مستويات الدافعية الجوهرية للطلبة عند منحهم فرصة اختيار مواضيع المحادثة باللغة الإنجليزية وذلك مقارنة مع مستوياتهم الدافعية عند اختيار المواضيع من طرف الباحثان.

كلمات مفتاحية: الدافعية الجوهرية؛ التحدث باللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية؛ الاختيار الذاتي للمواضيع.

1.Introduction

Speaking is considered as the most important language skill. This skill is particularly an essential aspect of learners' language-proficiency development (Goh & Burns, 2012: 21). Speaking enables learners to acquire oral skills, such as day-to-day conversations, oral presentations, and seminar skills, which are necessary for their academic, personal and professional success (see Bddiaf &

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Ouahmiche, 2020; Tiaiba & Nadjai, 2020;). Although this claim is widely acknowledged, many learners are very dissatisfied with their speaking classes, which generally fail to meet their expectations.

This situation reflects the realities lived at the department of English in Blida 2 University, Algeria. At this department, students reported that their speaking classes engage them in some structured discussions where they follow pre-determined steps, such as opening and closing a speech, taking a turn, and responding to questions throughout the discussion. By the end of the lesson, the teacher provides feedback on students' performances. Although, teachers' feedback has been empirically supported in EFL contexts (Taddarth, 2019), students claimed that they feel motivated to perform a task when it is graded; otherwise, they avoid participating in many classroom discussions.

This situation reveals that the speaking classes are producing extrinsically motivated students. For this category of students, the main reason for engaging in activities is the grades they may attain. This is problematic because teachers need to promote both extrinsic and intrinsic forms of motivation in their students. While it is interesting that teachers support students' extrinsic motivation by rewarding their efforts, they should also tap into learners' internal sources of motivation, which are known as intrinsic motivation (IM).

This study examines the effects of self-selection, a teaching practice accepted by many theorists and researchers in the fields of education and psychology as an intrinsic motivational factor, on students' IM to speak English as a foreign language. Before explaining the methodology followed in this study, the following section reviews the literature related to the nature of IM and the role of self-selection in enhancing students' IM when learning a foreign language.

2. Background of the Study

2.1. Intrinsic Motivation

Theorists distinguish between extrinsic and intrinsic motivation¹. Extrinsic Motivation (EM) is seen when a person performs an activity or a behavior for some external factors, such as attaining rewards or avoiding punishments (Vallerand, 1997). A student who is extrinsically motivated does not engage in an activity for its own sake; he rather undertakes the activity with the goal to obtain some rewards, such as better grades or teacher's satisfaction. Intrinsic Motivation (IM), however, is perceived when an individual performs an activity out of interest and enjoyment (Ryan & Deci, 1985:11). Accordingly, an intrinsically motivated student engages in an activity "for the

¹ Along with these two major types of motivation, there exist other sub-types of motivation, which theorists tend to relate to either extrinsic or intrinsic motivation (for further details, see Rahmani, 2018).

enjoyment it provides, the learning it permits, or the feelings of accomplishment it evokes" (Lepper, 1988).

Ryan and Deci (2000) posit that feelings of enjoyment and accomplishment stem from a person's basic psychological needs for autonomy and competence. An individual enjoys an activity and experiences autonomy when he perceives his engagement in the activity to be volitional and self-endorsed. The individual also feels competent when he perceives that his environment allows him the opportunity to develop, exercise, express, and explore his own capacities and skills (Ryan & Deci, 2017: 12). Accordingly, perceived competence and perceived choice are theorized to be positive predictors of IM while perceived pressure/tension is regarded as a negative predictor of IM (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

Research in the field of language learning reveals that if IM is nurtured in the learner, it can result in many positive effects. It can sustain engagement in L2 learning, reduce anxiety, increase self-efficacy, and lead to positive attitudes towards language learning (Ehrman, 1996: 142; Van Lier, 2014: 113). This is because IM enables a learner to cultivate feelings of competence and personal control of the learning process. The issue that needs to be raised at this level is how can a language teacher enhance his learners' IM and create for them opportunities to express their thoughts and feel a sense of autonomy and competence in class?

2.2. Self-Selected Materials to Enhance Learners' IM

Researchers suggest that there exist some key practices a teacher could use to promote IM. Prominent to these practices is self-selection. They claim that self-selection can increase IM because it makes a learner feel autonomous, competent, and in control of his environment, or his behaviors. A student is intrinsically energized to engage in an activity or a behavior when he perceives that his basic psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and control are satisfied by his environment (the classroom environment). However, when the student perceives his environment as controlling, he will experience an undermined motivational state (Deci & Ryan, 1985: 29; Deci & Ryan, 1991).

This claim was confirmed by a number of studies. In their meta-analysis study, Patal, et al, (2008) found that self-selection had positive effects on the participants' IM and task performance. Similarly, Patal, et al, (2010) and Meng and Ma (2015) stressed the importance of self-selection in enhancing IM and performance. The findings of these investigations showed that when the researchers provided self-selection opportunities, the students showed a greater IM, leading to a significant increase in task and tests performance.

The interface between self-selection and learners' IM has also been discussed in language education literature. Skinner and Belmont (1993) found that IM increased when students perceived that they were permitted to select their reading materials. This is because they were not forced to

read texts; they rather selected books they wanted to read. These findings support Kragler (2000)'s claim that self-selection opportunities foster students' interest and develop in them an ownership of the reading process.

In the area of learning and teaching the writing skill, researchers have shown their support to the use of students' selection of topics. They argued that when students are allowed to choose the topics of their own writings, they will be more productive, more engaged, and more motivated (Zamel, 1983; Gradwohl & Schumacher, 1989).

The use of topic-selection in teaching the speaking skill has also attracted some researchers who consider it as a key factor for L2 speaking development. In his work on interaction in L2 speaking classroom, Hatch (1978, cited by Ellis, 1992) suggests that allowing learners to choose topics of conversation provides a significant basis for interactional opportunities in the L2 classroom. Similarly, Ellis (1984) claims that when students selected topics of conversation, their willingness to communicate in L2 increases. This is because topic-selection helps them to feel free to express their own meanings. This claim is also stressed by Ellis (1992: 44) who considers topic-selection as important for L2 acquisition in a number of ways: **a.** it enhances students' motivation; **b.** it helps reduce the linguistic complexity for students; **c.** it creates opportunities for negotiating meaning when a communication problem occurs; and **d.** it stimulates more extensive and more complex L2 production on the learner's part.

Reviewing the literature related to the role of self-selection in teaching and learning a foreign language reveals that most of the research to date has focused on arguing the need for students' topic-control in enhancing L2. Although self-selection has been considered an important teaching practice that primarily serves to promote students' IM, its effects on students' IM to speak a foreign language has attracted somewhat very little attention from L2 researchers. Therefore, the present study attempts to shed light on this issue.

The objective of this study is to examine the effects of self-selected topics on students' IM to speak English as a foreign language. The study raises one major research question: what are the effects of self-selected topics on students' IM to speak English as a foreign language?

3. Methods

3.1. Participants

The study's data were collected from 26 first year students (M=10 and F=16) enrolled at the department of English in Blida 2 University, Algeria. The participants were chosen because they all share approximately the same learning experience as they belong to the same educational group and were taught by the same teachers.

To reach the study's objective, the 26 participants were engaged in a six-week speaking activity. In the first three weeks, the students were assigned topics to speak about by the researchers; the assigned topics were chosen from the teacher's curriculum materials and corresponded to the units teachers were delivering during the study. For the remaining weeks, the students were allowed to select their own topics. To measure the participants' IM and explore their perceptions of the self-selected topics practice, the study relied on two research instruments: a questionnaire and an interview.

3. 2. Research Instruments

3.2.1. Questionnaire

Students' IM was measured using an adapted version of the IMI developed by Deci and Ryan (2010). The inventory contains several subscales from which we selected four dimensions: interest/enjoyment, perceived competence, perceived choice, and pressure/tension. Every subscale comprises a group of items, which were randomly ordered in the questionnaire as it is shown in the following table:

Table 1. The number of IMI Items as they Appear on The Students' Questionnaires

Subscales	Items
Interest/Enjoyment	1, 5, 8, 10, 14®, 17, 20
Perceived Competence	4, 7, 12, 16, 22
Perceived Choice	3, 11®, 15, 19®, 21®
Pressure/Tension	2, 6®, 9, 13®, 18®

® represents the negative statements in the questionnaire, which were reversed in the study's data analysis phase.

The questionnaire's items are rated on 7-point scales: scale "1" indicates that the given statement is "not at all true"; scale "4" shows that the statement is "somewhat true"; and scale "7" means that the statement is "very true" for the respondent.

Since the validity of the IMI has already been examined and supported by other researchers (e.g., McAuley, et al, 1987), the current study focused on measuring its reliability. The researchers conducted a pilot test with a group of 20 students. The pilot testing students' answers were used mainly for testing the questionnaire's reliability and were not included in the study's findings. The results of the pilot were tested using Cronbach's Alpha in SPSS software 20. The following table displays the final reliability coefficients for the study's subscales.

Table 2. Reliability coefficients for the study's subscales

Subscales	Number of Items	Cronbach's Alpha (α)
Interest/Enjoyment	7	,687
Perceived Competence	5	,817
Perceived Choice	5	,575

Pressure/Tension	5	,511
Reliability Coefficient	22	,773

According to Table 2. the reliability for all subscales varied between ($\alpha=,817$) as the highest coefficient and ($\alpha=,511$) as the lowest coefficient. The general reliability coefficient of the study's subscales was good ($\alpha =,773$). The pilot test results indicated that the subscales of the study's questionnaire possessed a satisfactory level of reliability (Nunnally & Bernstein,1994).

3.2.2. The interview

The participants' perceptions of the use of self-selected topics in their speaking classes was collected through a structured interview. A group of 10 students responded to the interview questions.

4. Results

4.1. Questionnaires

Data obtained from the IMI questionnaires were numerically coded and analyzed using the IMB SPSS statistics software 20. Tables 3 below summarizes the findings of the two questionnaires subscales.

Table 3. Students' IM Levels after the A.Ts and S.S.T s Sessions

Subscales	Number of Items	Number of Students	Mean		Std. Deviation	
			A.Ts	S.S.Ts	A.Ts	S.S.Ts
Interest/Enjoyment	7	26	2,926 3	5,758 1	,4313 2	,7235 1
Perceived Competence	5	26	2,974 0	5,315 4	,4394 7	,2078 6
Perceived Choice	5	26	3,098 0	4,768 0	,7857 3	,5821 7
Pressure/Tension	5	26	3,638 0	5,558 0	,7465 7	,8458 3

A.Ts: Assigned-Topics S.S.Ts: Self-selected topics

According to Table 3, the mean differences between speaking about assigned and self-selected topics were high. The analysis of the Interest/Enjoyment subscale after the two designed activities showed that the participants' interest level after experiencing speaking about the assigned topics was 2,93; this level increased to 5,76 after the self-selected topics activity. Similarly, The participants perceived themselves more competent while practicing the self-selected topics activity with a mean of 5,32 as compared with their perceived competence during the assigned topics activity with 2,98. The results of the Perceive Choice subscale revealed that the participants' ratings after the self-selected topics

were higher (4,77) than their scorings after the assigned topics (3,10). For the Pressure/Tension subscale, the difference between the participants' recorded scorings after the assigned and the self-selected topics sessions was statistically significant with 3,64 and 5,56, respectively.

In view that the same participants' IM levels were measured at two different time periods, we considered the use of a paired samples t-test. The test was used to compare the participants' means after the assigned and the self-selected topics sessions (Peers, 1996; Larson-Hall, 2009). This is shown in Table 4 below.

Table 4. Paired-Samples T-Test for the post-Assigned-Topics and Post-self-Selected Topics Sessions

	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	t-value	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	*Significant at the 0,05 Level
Pair S.S.Ts-A.Ts	2,33271	,91707	,19552	11,931	21	,000*	

A.Ts: Assigned-Topics S.S.Ts: Self-selected topics

Table 4 indicates a t-value of 11,931, df=21, and a p-value of ,000. Since the p-value is less than 0,05, we concluded that there was a significant statistical difference between the participants' IM levels after the assigned and the self-selected topics sessions.

5.2. Interviews

The analysis of the students' interviews revealed that the self-selected topics activity generated excitement, interest, and many other positive predictors of IM to speak English.

Results of Q1 (Which of the two activities did you enjoy most: assigned or free topics? Why?) showed that most of the interviewees enjoyed the practice of self-selection topics in their speaking classes because it allowed them to freely express and share their ideas with their classmates . For instance, one student said that: "the idea of free topics in speaking is great ... yes, I do feel interested because I feel like I'm expressing my own thoughts". Another student reported that: "when the teacher chose the topics for us I felt like I'm guided and I spent a very long time planning what to say ... I used a paper to write my ideas ... I felt guided by the teacher, the topic and the paper ... but when the teacher gave us the chance to choose topics I really felt relieved I enjoyed the self-selection sessions". Another interesting explanation was provided by a student who commented that: "I really enjoyed talking about the free topics because they reflect me ... they reflect my knowledge, my ideas ... because as a student I feel like I have many ideas that I wish to share with my friends and classmates and this speaking activity helped me to do so".

Analyzing students' answers to Q2 (After this short experience with self-selected topics in your speaking classes, do you think that free topics is a teaching practice that can motivate you to participate in class without waiting for any sort of rewarding (for example adding marks) from your teacher's part?) showed that half of the respondents believed that free topics can enhance their

motivation to speak because it has the power to stimulate in them a sense of responsibility and a willingness to participate in class. For example, a student commented that: "Yes, I do believe that it is a helpful practice ... when I chose the topics in the last activity, I felt that I had many things to say ... I wanted to say all what I know about the topics without caring too much about time constraints or grading. Of course, I do care for grades ... as a student but while talking I really wanted to share my ideas with my friends ... Let's say this was my first goal". Another student explained that: "well ... since I chose the topics I felt responsible for my choice ... I focused mainly on the ideas and how to express my thoughts...". However, it should be noted that the other half of the interviewees claimed that self-selection is a motivational teaching practice, but speaking teachers should reward their students' active participation.

For Q3 (To what extent did you feel satisfied with your performances when talking about free topics?), the great majority of the respondents confirmed that they were not very satisfied with their performances. However, they perceived themselves more competent and relaxed when they selected topics for themselves.

6. Discussion and Conclusion

The significance of IM for sustaining and stimulating L2 learning has been observed in a number of studies (Van Lier, 1996). However, there is very little research in the field of foreign language teaching to find ways to increase students' IM. The present study examined the effects of self-selected topics on students' IM to speak English as a foreign language. The study's results suggest that allowing students the opportunity to select topics of their speaking tasks can have many positive effects on their IM. The analysis of students' answers to the questionnaires and the interview questions permitted us to observe significant differences between their IM levels after the assigned and self-selected topics experiences.

When the students selected topics for themselves, they showed more interest in the speaking activity than when the researchers assigned them topics. The participants enjoyed the self-selection experience because it stimulated in them a sense of autonomy. The majority of the students who responded to Q1 of the interview found the activity interesting because they were allowed to freely express their thoughts to their peers. These findings confirm Ryan and Deci's (2000) claim that a person shows interest in a particular activity when he perceives it as self-initiated. In other terms, the study's findings reveal that allowing students to choose topics in their speaking classes can sustain their interest and satisfy their basic psychological need for autonomy, which is considered as the strongest predictor of IM.

The study's findings also suggest that the self-selection activity helped students to feel competent and in control of the activity at hand. The students' perceived competence and perceived

choice after the self-selected topics experience was 5,32 and 4,77, respectively. Students' answers to Q2 of the interview reveal that the feelings of competence and control they felt during the self-selection activity were the results of their enjoyment of the activity itself. Thus, the participants reported that self-selected topics is a teaching practice that can enhance their willingness to participate in class. This indicates that the self-selection activity was an opportunity for the majority of the students to explore their own capacities as it increased their willingness to express their thoughts in English.

Another interesting finding is that the self-selection activity, to some extent, helped the students to feel less pressured when speaking in class. The difference between the participants' pressure levels after the assigned and free-topics was significant with 3,64 and 5,56, respectively. The students' answers to Q3 of the interview revealed that the majority of the interviewees perceived the self-selection activity as more relaxing than the assigned-topics activity. This is because they felt more willing to express their thoughts when the researchers allowed them to select topics. This finding confirms the hypothesis that topic-selection is a key motivational factor that increases students' willingness to speak in L2 (Ellis, 1984; Ellis, 1992). However, the participants showed a dissatisfaction with their performances in both activities (assigned and self-selected topics). This dissatisfaction can be attributed to the fact that although the students felt relaxed when they selected topics for themselves (an indicator of IM), they were also in need for some external motivational sources (EM) in form of some educational rewarding, such as positive feedback or good grades.

7. References

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