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Getting Started With Self-Determination Theory in Language Education: Reflections on the 16th RILAE Lab Session

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Abstract

Self-Determination Theory (SDT) has gained prominence in education as a framework for understanding motivation, well-being, and flourishing, yet many language educators are still exploring how to apply it in self-access and related contexts. This paper reports on the 16th RILAE Lab Session, “Getting Started with Self-Determination Theory,” which also served as the inaugural online symposium of the IAPLL SDT Special Interest Group. The authors provide a brief summary of the sessions and discuss how the event framed SDT as a practical and research-informed lens for language education.

Keywords: SDT, framework, research, flourishing, motivation, well-being, practical applications

On 18 June, the Research Institute for Learner Autonomy Education (RILAE) hosted its 16th Lab Session, “Getting Started with Self-Determination Theory (SDT),” which also served as the inaugural online symposium of the International Association for the Psychology of Language Learning (IAPLL) SDT Special Interest Group (SIG). Bringing together researchers and practitioners from a wide range of contexts, the event explored how SDT can support motivation, well-being, and flourishing in language education. Framed around the guiding question “How can language educators get started in SDT?”, the presenters positioned the theory not only as an analytical lens, but also as a practical framework for designing need-supportive learning environments.

There were 18 presentations, some live, some pre-recorded, featuring three types of short sessions: personal narratives around how language educators got started in SDT, research insights, and SDT in practice. The event was held online in two shifts to accommodate participants in different time zones. The three featured presenters were all members of the IAPLL SDT SIG committee: William Davis (University of Oklahoma, USA), Jo Mynard (Kanda University of International Studies, Japan), and Abigail Parrish (University of Sheffield, UK). In

this summary, we will briefly review the presentations across the three types and offer some observations on what we learned from the event.

Summary of the Presentations

Narratives

Four researchers shared their stories about how they got started in SDT, and how it has influenced their research, practice, and lives in general. First, **Curtis Edlin** (Kwansei Gakuin University, Japan) shared how his knowledge of SDT's basic psychological needs and how they can be supported or thwarted helped him to make appropriate choices when considering new environments and workplaces. **Jeanette Marie Kobayashi**, an assistant professor at Doshisha Women's College of Liberal Arts in Kyoto and a doctoral student at the University of St Andrews in Scotland, discussed how she became involved in SDT research, which she found offers a sustainable and evidence-based approach to understanding and supporting motivation and well-being. **Arzu Kıratlı** (Ankara Yıldırım Beyazıt University, Türkiye) explored how her nearly 20 years of teaching experience transformed into a questioning process during her doctoral studies, and how, after receiving training in learning advising, SDT formed the theoretical foundation of her advising experience. Finally, **Jo Mynard** (Kanda University of International Studies, Japan) shared her personal journey into SDT, spanning from initial exposure during graduate studies through decades of work in learner autonomy and self-access learning centers, highlighting how SDT principles became instrumental in framing their advising and learner support practices.

Research Insights

Seven presenters discussed research in SDT. In the morning session, **Yuka Kono**, a PhD candidate at Waseda University and a full-time assistant professor at the Polytechnic University of Japan, presented a newly developed causality orientation scale (COS2) that demonstrates promising psychometric robustness for measuring motivational orientations in English language learning contexts, with plans for further validation and cross-cultural studies. **James Taylor** (International College of Technology, Japan) shared his current research on the experiences of three foreign English teachers in Japan working in the Eikaiwa context and how their basic

psychological needs for autonomy, relatedness, and competence were satisfied and frustrated.

Jeanette Marie Kobayashi (Doshisha Women's College of Liberal Arts / University of St Andrews) shared her current research on Goal Contents Theory (GCT) to explore how students with different goal profiles describe their English language learning goals and experiences.

Quint Oga-Baldwin (Waseda University, Japan) shared that a team of researchers has developed and validated a scale measuring intrinsic and extrinsic goal contents in foreign language learning across multiple countries (Japan, China, and the UK), finding that goals are distinct from motives and that the relationships between regulatory styles and learning goals vary significantly across cultural contexts.

In the afternoon session, **Scott Shelton-Strong**, a senior learning advisor and lecturer at Kanda University of International Studies in Japan, and a doctoral researcher at the Universidad de Alicante, España, shared his mixed-methods study showing how learners' well-being and flourishing can be nurtured through the reflective dialogue and learner–advisor relationships central to Advising in Language Learning (Shelton-Strong, 2022, 2025). **Salsabeel Abed Rubboh Budeir**, an English language teacher and second-year PhD candidate at Arab American University, examined how English language teachers in Palestinian Tawjihi classrooms support student motivation, finding that while teachers effectively foster competence and relatedness, students' motivation is predominantly driven by external pressures such as exam success and university admission rather than an intrinsic desire to learn. **Nicolas Emerson**, a PhD student at Waseda University and a full-time lecturer at Kyushu Sangyo University, Japan, reported on a 7-week implementation of Collabowrite, a generative artificial intelligence (GenAI)-enhanced collaborative writing application in a Japanese university EFL program, demonstrating how SDT can be used as a design framework in addition to an analytic lens for understanding language learning mechanisms in GenAI-supported classroom environments. Finally, featured speaker **Abigail Parrish**, lecturer in languages education at the University of Sheffield, UK, presented findings on student motivation in modern foreign language learning in English schools, examining how autonomous motivation decreases over time (Parrish et al., 2025) and how policy decisions regarding language-learning requirements affect student engagement (Parrish & Lanvers, 2019; Parrish, 2024). The research emphasized the tension between school autonomy-support and behavioral control, and revealed that student choice in language learning correlates with higher intrinsic motivation and need satisfaction.

Applications to Practice

Five presentations focussed on practical applications of SDT. Featured speaker **William Davis** (University of Oklahoma, USA) shared how SDT can serve as a useful framework for language teaching by supporting students' basic psychological needs—autonomy, competence, and relatedness—and fostering intrinsic motivation and engagement. He argued that SDT's focus on human flourishing offers critical insights for transforming language education away from purely economic or career-driven rationales toward holistic learner well-being, and called for more qualitative, context-specific research to understand how pedagogical practices can satisfy learners' psychological needs across diverse language learning settings. **Donald Patterson** (Seirei Christopher University, Japan) discussed how SDT shaped changes in his teaching practices, including greater choice in assignments, more intentional feedback, and stronger connections between classroom learning and students' lives. **Hatice Karaaslan, Zeynep Olgun Pamuk, and Arzu Kırath** (Ankara Yıldırım Beyazıt University, Türkiye) introduced a creativity-based reflective dialogue approach, inspired by arts-based practices and informed by SDT, in which students engage with imaginative, metaphorical prompts that unexpectedly open space for honest, emotionally rich, and personally meaningful reflection. This approach extends the elicited metaphor analysis paradigm to reveal not only beliefs but also affect. (<https://www.menti.com/alddq89u66x1>). Featured speaker, **Jo Mynard** (Kanda University of International Studies, Japan), showed how SDT has provided a valuable framework for understanding how self-access and outside-class learning environments can support not only language learning, but also learner motivation, well-being, and thriving. The presenter illustrated how key features of self-access learning centers (SALCs) can support basic psychological needs and sustained participation (Mynard, 2022; Mynard & Shelton-Strong, 2022). **Hatice Karaaslan, Ahmet Çolak** (Ankara Yıldırım Beyazıt University, Türkiye), and **Stephanie Howell** (Gold EDU, USA) present a transformative 5-week on-site design sprint following the lead of Stanford d.school and Harvard Project Zero's thinking routines. The design sprint aims to shift students from passive translation to active problem-solving by empowering them to use English as an authentic design tool. Finally, **Ha Thi Phuong Pham** (Te Herenga Waka—Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand) demonstrated how she applied SDT principles (Ryan &

Deci, 2000) while supervising Vietnamese undergraduate students as they wrote collaborative graduation theses.

Summary of Key Themes

Basic Psychological Needs and Intrinsic Motivation

Throughout the event, SDT was introduced as a macro-theory of human motivation that has substantial implications for language learning and teaching. The core premise is that learners' motivation and well-being are supported when three basic psychological needs, consisting of autonomy, competence, and relatedness, are nurtured in their environments (Deci & Ryan, 2017). Autonomy is going beyond simple freedom of choice to include meaningful options, learner voice, and personal relevance in tasks and curricula. Competence is linked to appropriate challenge, scaffolding, and feedback that allows learners to experience progress and effectiveness in their language use. Relatedness refers to feeling connected to teachers, advisors, and peers, and is associated with belonging, care, and collaborative engagement. Speakers repeatedly returned to these needs as a foundation for understanding both learners' engagement and their capacity to flourish in language education (Parish; Rubboh Budeir).

Beyond Basic Psychological Needs Theory

At the same time, the presenters highlighted that SDT extends beyond Basic Psychological Needs Theory. Presentations also highlighted several mini-theories within the SDT framework. These included Organismic Integration Theory (Oga-Baldwin), which describes how motivation is internalized along a continuum from external regulation to intrinsic motivation, Goal Contents Theory, which distinguishes between more intrinsic and more extrinsic goal types, and Causality Orientations Theory, which examines people's general tendencies towards more autonomous, controlled, or impersonal motivation. These perspectives were visible in talks on topics such as goal profiles in English language learning (Kobayashi; Oga-Baldwin) and the development of a new causality orientations scale (Kono), which illustrated how SDT can be used to analyze nuanced aspects of motivation in language education.

Balancing Research and Practice

A notable feature of the LAb session was its balance of research-oriented and practice-oriented contributions. Several presentations demonstrated how SDT-informed design can reshape classroom practice, self-access learning, and advising. For example, talks on autonomy-supportive teaching (Patterson), advising beyond the classroom (Mynard; Shelton-Strong, and design-thinking sprints (Karaaslan, Çolak, & Howell) for learner autonomy showed how instructors and advisors can intentionally create conditions that support autonomy, competence, and relatedness in concrete ways, such as offering structured yet meaningful choices, building psychologically safe spaces for experimentation, and cultivating strong relational connections (Shelton-Strong). Other contributions, including reflections on personal and professional journeys into SDT (Edlin), made the theory accessible to newcomers by showing how educators gradually integrated SDT principles into their own work (Karaaslan, Olgun Pamuk, & Kıratlı; Kıratlı; Pham).

Innovation and Future Directions

The event also highlighted that SDT is a promising framework for future research and practice in language education. One of the featured speakers called for more longitudinal qualitative work, action research, and curriculum-embedded studies that can capture how motivation, need satisfaction, and flourishing unfold over time in authentic learning settings (Davis). In addition, presentations illustrated how SDT can inform the design and evaluation of technology-mediated environments, including GenAI-enhanced collaborative writing tools (Emerson) and self-access ecosystems, suggesting that SDT can contribute to understanding learner experiences in rapidly evolving digital contexts. SDT can also provide a framework for understanding teachers' professional experiences (Edlin; Taylor).

Conclusions

Overall, the 16th RILAE LAb Session demonstrated that SDT offers a rich, empirically grounded framework for rethinking language education around learners' flourishing. By foregrounding the basic psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness and showcasing applications of SDT across classrooms, advising, self-access learning, supervision, and educational technology, the event provided a compelling entry point for educators and researchers seeking to engage more deeply with SDT. For language educators, "getting started"

with SDT appears to involve both learning the key theoretical concepts and experimenting with small, context-sensitive changes that make learners' experiences more autonomy-supportive, competence-enhancing, and relationally rich.

More Information

- Research Institute for Learner Autonomy Education (RILAE) at Kanda University of International Studies: <https://kuis.kandagaigo.ac.jp/rilae/>
- Self-Determination Theory Special Interest Group (SDT SIG) of the International Association for the Psychology of Language Learning (IAPLL): <https://iapll.com/SDT-SIG>
- Full abstracts and recordings from the 16th LAb session can be found on the event website: <https://kuis.kandagaigo.ac.jp/rilae/lab16/>

Notes on the Contributors

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Jo Mynard is a professor in the Faculty of Global Liberal Arts, Director of the Self-Access Learning Center, and Director of the Research Institute for Learner Autonomy Education at Kanda University of International Studies in Chiba, Japan. She has an M.Phil. in Applied Linguistics (Trinity College, University of Dublin, Ireland) and an Ed.D. in TEFL (University of Exeter, UK). Her research interests include advising in language learning, the psychology of language learning, and learning beyond the classroom.

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