



Choice of task topic: Are the students more motivated?

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The power to choose has been widely recognized as motivating in diverse situations. This research investigated the differences in the motivation to do a task with three different levels of choice of task topic; none, limited, and complete. The results indicate there is greater motivation to do a task with a limited amount of choice, but this was not evident when students could choose any topic within the frame of the task.

様々の場面にて選択肢によって動機付けが高まります。この研究は三の種類タスクを行う場合、選択肢を加わればどの程度タスクをする動機が変更するのかと調べました。タスクトピックを選択肢なし、三つのタスクトピックから一つを選ぶ限界的選択肢、そしてタスク範囲にトピックを自由に選んで自由選択肢、選択肢を三段階に実行しました。結果によって選択肢なしの場合より限界的選択肢の方が動機が高くなりました。しかし、自由選択肢の場合に動機付けはなかったもしくは落ちた結果もありました。教育上の影響をまとめて述べます。

Motivation in the second or foreign language classroom and how to better motivate learners in foreign language classes has been a topic of great concern. Theories of motivation include, but are not limited to, Gardner's (1985) Socio-Educational Model, Deci and Ryan's (1985) theory of self-determined motivation as proposed by Noels (2001) for the second language classroom, Dörnyei's (2001; Dörnyei & Otto, 1998) theory of motivation as a process, Norton's (2000) theory of investment, Schumann's (2001) theory of learning as foraging, and Julkunen's (1989) theory of task motivation, amongst others. The one common point that these theories have is that motivated learners, in comparison to less motivated learners, will in most cases have higher achievement, will continue their studies longer, or will seek opportunities outside the classroom to use language. The research in this paper concerns how the level of motivation to do tasks changes when choice is incorporated.

Choice and motivation

The notion of choice implies power to control the environment. In the words of Langer and Rodin (1976, p. 192), choice is “a crucial variable in enhancing an induced sense of control” (p. 192). Zuckerman, Porac, Lathin, Smith, and Deci (1978) studied university students who were given either a choice or no choice of a puzzle to complete with the result that the students who had a choice spent more time on the puzzle, an indicator of higher intrinsic motivation. Zuckerman et al. (1978) claimed “that people’s motivation is greater when they have more rather than less control over their environment” (p. 445).

A theory of motivation that operationalizes choice as an important component is the theory of self-determined motivation and much of the research of choice today concerns how the keystone of this theory, intrinsic motivation, is affected by whether or not a choice was present. According to Deci (1987), self-determination is the process of utilizing one’s will, the capacity to decide how to behave and to have decisions be the locus of causality of behavior. In this theory, it is this perceived loci of causality that is important and as there is more intrinsic motivation, there is an increase in autonomy, and, opposingly, with greater extrinsic motivation, there is a decrease or an absence of autonomy.

For autonomy, the most important device is choice. In many of the operationalizations of intrinsic motivation, if there is no choice, there is no autonomy, and if there is no autonomy, there is no intrinsic motivation. According to Deci and Ryan (1985, p. 154), choice is central to the orientation of autonomy.

Culture and the power of choice

However, recent research has revealed that choice, and therefore autonomy, may be viewed differently in different cultures. Western society may regard the availability of choice as preeminent in daily life. Iyengar and her colleagues (Iyengar & DeVoe, 2003; Iyengar & Lepper, 1999, 2002; Iyengar, Lepper, & Ross, 1999) propose, using the paradigm of Markus and Kitayama’s (1991) theory of independent cultures (where the self is seen as separate from other groups or the family) and interdependent cultures (where the self is seen as part of the group or family), that those from cultures that have more interdependent selves, mostly in East Asia, value independent choice less and choose according to group norms or are more highly influenced by others, such as a parents, than those from cultures that have more independent selves, mostly Westerners.

In the area of language learning and the cultural influence of autonomy, Littlewood (1999) promotes the notion of two types of autonomy, a proactive autonomy (of Western societies) and a reactive autonomy (of East Asian societies). In proactive autonomy, learners take charge of their own learning, select methods and techniques for learning, determine objectives and eventually evaluate what they have done (p. 75). Reactive autonomy, according to Littlewood (1999) “is the kind of autonomy which does not create its own direction but, once a direction has been initiated, enables learners to organize their resources autonomously in order to reach their goal” (p. 75). In this case there is more group work, including collaborative and cooperative learning strategies. It is Littlewood’s theory that Asian learners are more reactive in their autonomy orientation and will have

experienced fewer learning situations where proactive autonomy could be exercised, but since Asian learners have the same capacity for autonomy as learners from other regions of the world, they can develop high levels of both proactive and reactive autonomy in group-based forms since the language classroom can, without inhibiting learner freedom of choice, give experience in exercising proactive autonomy (Littlewood, 1999, pp. 87-88).

Research questions and variables

The power of choice has been shown to be a strong motivator for learning. Even though there may be qualifications based on research showing there may be less motivation for learners in Asian cultures, the strength of choice as a motivator in the language classroom in an Asian setting is worth investigating. In addition, many of the studies showing cultural differences for choice as motivating concerned children (e.g., Amabile & Gitomer, 1984; Cordova & Lepper, 1996). How choice influences task motivation in adults in Asia remains unexplored. Particularly, in the area of English language teaching, whether choice helps motivate students when completing tasks is the question I am seeking to answer. If choice indeed improves motivation, then it can be incorporated into lessons in order to enhance learning.

For this study, there were three different types of tasks: descriptive, narrative, and decision-making. Choice was operationalized into three levels: no choice, where students do the task topic pre-selected by the teacher; limited, where students choose from one of three pre-selected task topics; and complete, where students can choose any topic within the confines of the task.

Task materials

For the descriptive tasks where there was no choice or limited choice, materials modified from Nicholson and Sakuno (1982) (example in Appendix 1) were utilized. The student with the missing information (Partner B) needed to interact with his or her partner who had the complete information (Partner A) to find the correct answers. Narrative tasks from Heaton (1966) (example in Appendix 2) where there was no choice or limited choice were used in which one student had the complete story (Partner A) and the other student (Partner B) had the story in a jumbled order and through interaction put the story in the correct order. For the open choice tasks, the students could describe any place they chose (while their partner drew it) and narrate any personal story they chose (while their partner outlined it). The decision-making tasks contained problems that required mutual consensus on a solution (Appendix 3). The open choice of task topic used topics pre-selected by the students on environmental problems (Appendix 4).

Method

Participants and apparatus

In all, there were 107 university-aged students who participated in this research. After the students completed the task, they were asked to answer a survey in their native language, Japanese. Items for this survey were incorporated from the works of Julkunen (1989) and Takashima (2000). These items are listed in Table 1. Each item was answered using a five-point Lickert scale ranging from 1, (*I don't think so at all*) to 5, (*I strongly believe so*).

Table 1. Items from the after-task survey

Items for the after-task survey
Item 1. I liked this task. 私はこのタスクを楽しんで行った。
Item 2. I learned from this task. 私はこのタスクから何かを学んだことができた。
Item 3. I told my feelings to my partner while doing this task. 私は自分の気持ちを自由にパートナーと話すことができたと思う。
Item 4. I talked with my partner without undue silence 私は不自然な沈黙なしにパートナーと話すことができたと思う。
Item 5. I cooperated with my partner while doing this task. 私は、自分のパートナーと協力できたと思う。
Item 6. I enjoyed doing this task. 私はこのタスクが楽しむことができた。
Item 7 I want to do more tasks like this. 私はこのようなタスクをもっと行いたい。
Item 8. This task was difficult. 私にとってこのタスクは難しかった。
Item 9. I used a lot of time doing this task. 私はこのタスクにたくさんの時間を使ったと思う。
Item 10. I did the task to the best of my ability. 私は全力を尽くしてこのタスクをやりとおすことができたと思う。
Item 11. I was able to concentrate while doing this task. 私はこのタスクに集中した。
Item 12. I am satisfied with my performance doing this task. 私は自分のできばえに満足している。

Procedures

This study utilized a 3x3 design. The tasks were implemented utilizing a counterbalanced design in three different classes. In total, there were nine different treatments. Also, to give students an equal experience, each task was done twice each session, a first-round task and a

second-round task, each with different topics. In all, the students did eighteen different tasks over the treatment.

Students completed the tasks in pairs and then completed after-task surveys. Only responses from the students who were task leaders, that is, students who held the complete information in the case of no choice sessions or students who made the choice of topic in the other sessions, were analyzed.

Results

Factor analyses

Before the data were submitted for factor analyses, univariate ($z = >\pm 3.25$) and multivariate outliers (Mahalanobis Distances) were removed and skewed data was transformed. The next step was to extract factors for later data analysis. This was done to prevent too many variables being used in the final analysis thereby increasing the probability of Type 1 errors. Factor analyses were done with SPSS 10 using the transformed data. After using various extraction methods with a combination of rotations, the combination leaving the most information across all nine treatments was the maximum likelihood extraction method using a varimax rotation. From this, a factor, termed Task Motivation, was extracted. This factor consisted of Item 1, Item 2, Item 6, Item 7, Item 10, and Item 11.

Next, the scores for the items in the factors were combined and averaged. Tables 2, 3, and 4 show the final descriptive results of the Task Motivation Factor for the different tasks that were used in the analysis.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics for task motivation, descriptive task

	NC	LC	CC
M	4.08	4.24	4.13
95% Confidence interval for mean			
Low	3.93	4.08	3.96
High	4.23	4.40	4.29
SD	.61	.66	.67
Skewness	-.26	-1.10	-.82
SES	.29	.29	.29
Kurtosis	-.46	1.83	.89
SEK	.58	.58	.58
N	100	93	86

Notes: NC = No choice of topic. LC = Limited choice of topic. CC = Complete choice of topic.

Table 3. Descriptive statistics for task motivation, narrative task

	NC	LC	CC
M	4.11	4.26	4.13
95% Confidence interval for mean			
Low	3.96	4.13	3.99
High	4.25	4.39	4.26
SD	.70	.62	.65
Skewness	-.39	-.54	-.11
SES	.26	.26	.25
Kurtosis	-.70	-.40	-.11
SEK	.51	.51	.50
N	89	89	90

Notes: NC = No choice of topic. LC = Limited choice of topic. CC = Complete choice of topic.

Table 4. Descriptive statistics for task motivation, decision-making task

	NC	LC	CC
M	4.15	4.25	3.80
95% confidence interval for mean			
Low	4.00	4.10	3.62
High	4.31	4.40	3.97
SD	.74	.68	.81
Skewness	-.61	-.79	-.21
SES	.26	.27	.26
Kurtosis	-.36	.01	-.74
SEK	.51	.53	.51
N	88	82	89

Notes: NC = No choice of topic. LC = Limited choice of topic. CC = Complete choice of topic.

Data analysis

The analysis for this research uses a within-groups repeated measures design. This design requires that the same participants be included in the data matrix across all nine treatments. Sixty-six participants remained who met these requirements. The data were analyzed using one-way repeated measures ANOVA with the alpha level set to .05. The results are shown in the Table 3 and Figure 1 below.

Table 5. Multivariate and univariate analysis of variance for task motivation

Source	Multivariate		Univariate		
	<i>df</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>MSE</i>
Task	2	3.40* ^a	1.80 ^d	2.940* ^c	0.64
Choice	2	8.41* ^a	1.70 ^e	11.52* ^c	2.72
Task x choice	4	4.04* ^b	1.95 ^f	3.78* ^f	0.19

Note: Multivariate *F* ratios were generated from Wilks's λ statistic.
^aMultivariate *df* = 2, 64. ^bMultivariate *df* = 4, 62. ^cUnivariate *F* ratio was generated from an average of the Greenhouse-Geisser and Huynh-Feldt statistics. ^dUnivariate *df* = 1.80, 117.01. ^eUnivariate *df* = 1.70, 110.21. ^fUnivariate *df* = 1.95, 245.97.
 **p* < .05

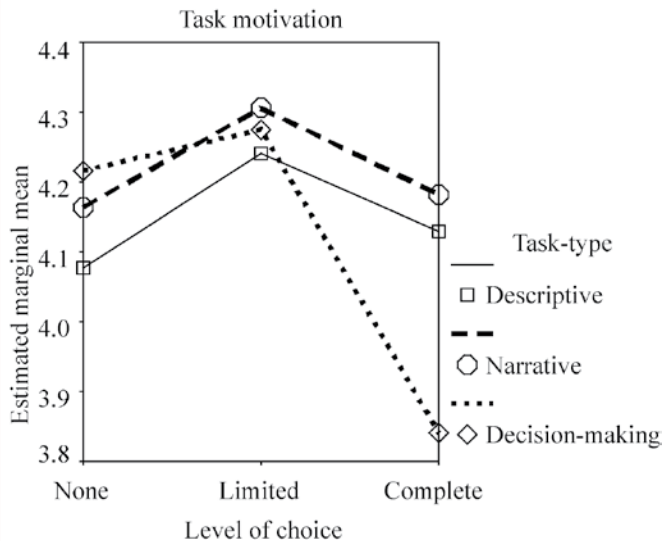


Figure 1. Profile plot of task motivation over the three levels of choice.

In the Task Motivation Factor, significant interaction was evident. The next step was to conduct paired-sample t-tests between the treatments to more closely examine the data for interaction. Of the nine possible pairings, two showed significant increases in the Task Motivation Factor. While this might seem trivial, the two that were significant were the tasks that were more similar, being from the same book, with only choice as the difference. For the Task Motivation variable, there was a significant increase in the score between the no choice treatment and the limited choice treatment for the descriptive task, $t(66) = -2.69, p < .05$ (2-tailed), and there was a significant increase in the score between the no choice treatment and the limited choice treatment for the narrative task, $t(66) = -2.44, p < .05$ (2-tailed).

Discussion

The results from this research point to the tendency for students to be more motivated when there is choice introduced in the language learning curriculum. This has been hypothesized by research that suggests that people are more motivated to do an activity when they have a feeling of control, and it has been shown to be a possibility in this case. The data also shows that limited autonomy was important to the students in this study, contrary to anecdotal claims that students in Japan react negatively to autonomy.

This may be because of feelings of well-being engendered by the power to choose. In a paper written in response to Iyengar and Lepper (1999) who claimed that people from Asian cultures may not be as motivated to do an activity when choice is introduced as those from Western cultures,

Chirkov, Ryan, Kim and Kaplan (2003), in a multi-cultural study that surveyed students in the US, Turkey, Russia, and South Korea, found that “whatever cultural practices one is considering, there appears to be a positive relation between more internalized or autonomous regulation of those practices and well-being, as measured through both hedonic (happiness) and eudaimonic (self-fulfillment) indicators” (Chirkov, et al. 2003, p. 106). It may be this sense of well-being is engendered through more autonomy no matter what culture the teacher is located in.

While the fall in motivation with complete choice of topic was not statistically significant for the descriptive and narrative tasks, it could come from two sources. One is pedagogic. The effects may come from the task. The task asked more of the students and they may have lost motivation because of the difficulty involved. Another explanation comes from the literature on choice by researchers such as Schwartz (2004a, 2004b) and Iyengar & Lepper (2000). Iyengar and Lepper (2000) discovered that people with many items to choose from had more frustration in the decision-process and found the task more difficult even though they enjoyed having a great amount of choice available, compared with those people who had fewer choices. They concluded that too much choice can be demotivating. In the end, this can lead to choice overload and a paradox that with greater choice there is more likelihood people will depend on institutions to help them make a decision (Iyengar & Lepper, 2000, p. 1004). The lesson to learn from is that the effects of having too much to choose from should be considered in class planning.

Implications for curriculum design

Teachers continually seek ways to enhance student motivation, which may be enhanced by incorporating choice up to a point. Although preparation may be lengthened, the rewards could be worth the effort. Gains might include an increase in student task output. Research conducted under the framework of the Output Hypothesis (Swain, 1985, 1995) has shown that production may enhance learning a foreign language in a task-based language learning environment. With higher intrinsic motivation, it has been suggested that students will continue a task longer (e.g., Zuckerman, et al. 1978). Compared with other methods of introducing autonomy into the curriculum (i.e., Benson & Voller, 1997) that in themselves may not work or cause a backlash in certain settings (i.e., Jones, 1995), introducing choice at the task implementation stage is a subtle method of promoting autonomy. With a simple change of adding choice, students may increase output, leading to improved language skills.

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Appendix 1

Partner A: Page 1

Please describe this picture to your partner to complete the answers.



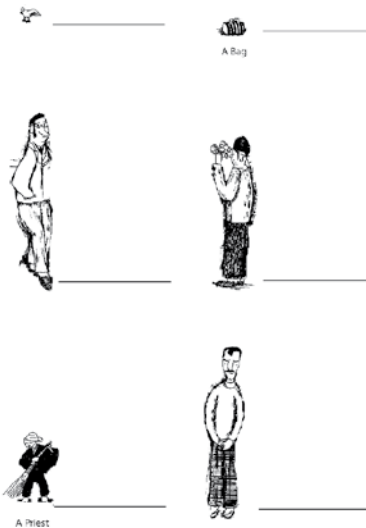
Partner B: Page 1

In this picture, there are many missing spaces. Your partner will describe the full picture to you. Please put the numbers below next to the proper picture on Page 2



Partner B: Page 2

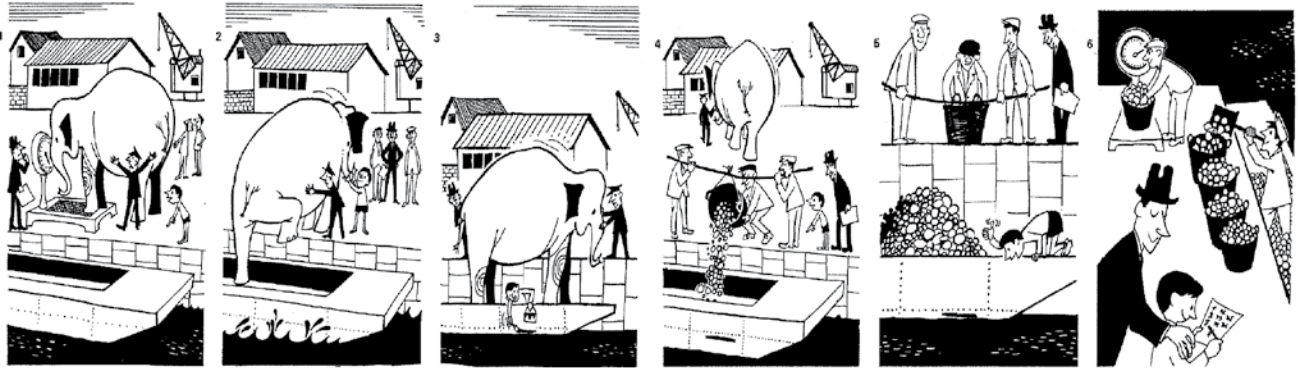
Where do these pictures go on Page 1? Listen to your partner describe the picture and please put the number of the missing place where the picture should go. Thank you.



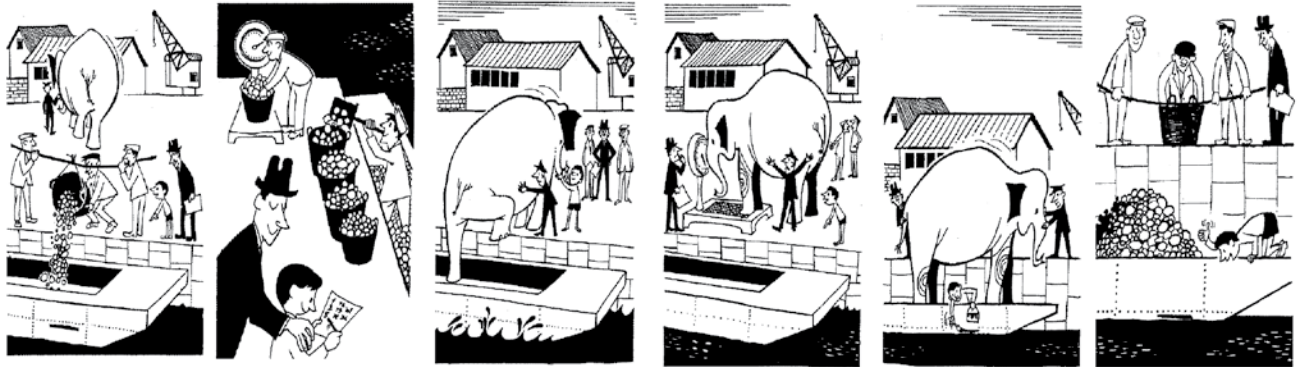
Appendix 2

JALT2006 — Community, Identity, Motivation

Partner A



Partner B



Appendix 3

No Choice of Topic, First-Round Task:

You and your partner have won a prize to visit three foreign countries. You can visit any three foreign countries but you only can spend one day in each country. The rest of the time you will be traveling in the plane. What three countries would you and your partner like to visit? Why do you two want to go to that country? Please discuss and decide with your partner which countries you would like to visit.

No Choice of Topic, Second-Round Task:

Please decide the following. You and your partner will be able to visit six world leaders of today. What questions would you like to ask them? Please write a question for each world leader.

Topics for Limited Choice of Topic, First-Round Task:

1. You and your partner will have a visitor from the United States. You and your partner have one day to take him to Kyoto. You and your partner have enough time to take this person to six (6) places. Which places do you want to go to? Please put a check next to the places you want to go to. Good Luck! (adapted from http://www.pref.nara.jp/nara_e/index.html).
2. You and your partner will go on a camping trip. What will you and your partner take? You will already have a tent, a sleeping bag, and a backpack. What ten (10) things will you take?
3. The university will make a time capsule. This is a box where you put personal things and then the time capsule is

put in the ground. This time capsule will removed from the ground in 100 years. What four (4) things will you put in this time capsule? Please choose four things with your partner and the reason for putting them in the time capsule. Good luck!

Topics for Limited Choice of Topic, Second-Round Task:

1. You and your partner will have a visitor from the United States. You and your partner have one day to take him to Kyoto. You and your partner have enough time to take this person to six (6) places. Which places do you want to go to? Please put a check next to the places you want to go to. Good Luck! (adapted from <http://www.japan-guide.com/e/e2155.html>).
2. You and your partner will go America. You and your partner only have enough space to take ten personal items between you. What will you and your partner take in your luggage? Please choose ten (10) things to take. What ten (10) things will you take?
3. You will make a home page of famous Japanese people of today. You and your partner only have enough space to write about four (4) people. Please choose four people and the reason you chose that person.

Appendix 4

A week ago, I gave you the list of topics to do for today. Please circle the topic you want to do today. Here are the topics:

The garbage problem
 Global warming
 Bad smells
 Dwindling resources
 Rising sea levels
 Fish depletion
 Nuclear waste
 Golf course construction
 Desertification
 Dirty air
 Dirty water
 Endangered species
 Population increase
 Food additives
 Acid rain
 Deforestation
 UV radiation
 Soil pollution
 Freon gas
 The ozone hole
 CO2
 Sinking land

Heat islands
 Kitchen waste
 Noise
 Dioxin
 Bird influenza
 Deforestation
 Dirty Oceans

Your own topic: _____

Now, please discuss with your partner the topic. You should be able to discuss

1. What the problem is.
2. What the cause of the problem is.
3. How the problem can be made better.

Now, discuss with your partner the above. In the space below, write how you and your partner think this problem should be made better: