Chapter 9

The Self-Determined English Language Learner

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ABSTRACT

English Language Learners have their own, individual set of needs. According to Deci and Ryan (1985), individuals need self-determination skills to be successful in their environment. Researchers agree that self-determination skills produce positive outcomes for individuals both in and out of school. This chapter provides families, students, and educators a working definition of self-determination and instructional practices that assist English Language Learners to develop self-determination skills both at school and in the home.

INTRODUCTION

Marielva lived in one of the largest cities in Mexico, and she moved to a small town in Texas when she was the age 13. Although she had taken a basic English class in school, she was considered a non-English speaker. The English as a Second Language (ESL) program at her new school met only one class period per day, and there was not a great deal of linguistic support. Such as many students, Marielva’s new home and situation would have been overwhelming, but she worked very hard to be academically successful.

According to LeClair, Doll, Osborn, and Jones (2009), English Language Learners [ELL] are not succeeding in U.S. classrooms, although they often receive additional support services such as ESL and bilingual classrooms. Self-determination is a topic that has been a hot topic in the area of special education; however, it is relevant to all students, including second language learning students.

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BACKGROUND

Self-Determination Theory

Self-determination theory [SDT], coined by Deci and Ryan (1985), is used as a framework for personality growth and development. According to Ryan and Deci (2002), self-determination theory can be used to predict developmental outcomes of individuals who are “active and integrated” or “reactive and alienate” in their environments. Ryan and Deci (2002) argued that in order for individuals to function in their environment, they require certain needs to be met. These needs are competence, relatedness, and autonomy. Ryan and Deci (2002) explained that individuals need to feel that they are effective (competence) in their environment. Individuals must feel connected to others (relatedness), and they need to have freedom to follow their own interests and values (autonomy).

Self-Determination Theory is divided into four mini-theories, and they were developed to explain the phenomenon that is motivation. The first mini-theory is the Cognitive Evaluation Theory [CET] (Ryan & Deci, 2002), which looks at the variables that determine behavior, specifically intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. The next mini-theory of SDT is Organismic Integration Theory [OIT], and it focuses on internalization, particularly in extrinsic motivation. Causality Orientations Theory [COT] is the third mini-theory, and it addressed individual’s desire toward self-determined behavior and placing themselves in environments that support their self-determination. Basic Needs Theory is the last mini-theory, and it describes the relationship between and individual’s basic needs and psychological health, well-being, and life goals (Ryan & Deci, 2002).

Grolnic and Apostoleris (2002) discovered that environments that include choice and reduce control facilitate autonomy, which affects student self-determination. For example, parents who are autonomy supportive encourage their children’s problem-solving skills and interests, which give the children a sense of freedom and a reduction of control. The researchers added that children who were “less self-regulated in school, higher in acting out, and lower in teacher-rated competence, and lower in achievement and grades” (p. 161) had parents that were more controlling. Grolnic and Apostoleris (2002) reported that parental control often increased with added pressure, which included pressures from without (ie. negative life events, financial burdens, etc.), pressures from below (ie. difficult child behavior), and pressure from within (ie. the parent self-esteem based on student performance).

Reeve (2002) applied SDT to educational settings. Reeve found that students achieve higher levels of academic performance when teachers support their autonomy, instead of focusing on controlling student behaviors in the classroom. Reeve (2002) stated that it is difficult to determine what autonomy-supportive teachers do in the classroom to provide this rich environment for students, but the benefits are great.

MAIN FOCUS OF THE CHAPTER

Competence

Second language learners will strive to gain competence first. These students have moved into a new environment, which can be compared to being dropped off on a new planet, where a new language is spoken. A new culture must be navigated, which includes social norms, education, and family dynamics, just to name a few. The majority of second language learners come into their new environment, seeking