

Surveying Mature-Aged Learner Needs for Lifelong Learning

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Abstract

This preliminary study examines the factors that help keep senior citizens engaged in lifelong learning. The paper starts with an overview of lifelong learning in Japan by briefly explaining its history and the position it continues to play in Japanese society. Next, the paper gives an overview of Self-determination Theory and explains how this theory was used as a framework of a qualitative survey. Using this framework, the paper then introduces a study involving two English language classes that had been running for 15 years and had high rates of returning students. The study found that by identifying the varying psychological needs of different class levels, educators can promote learning environments that are more conducive to lifelong learning for mature-aged learners.

本稿は、高齢者の生涯学習の継続に寄与する要素を考察する予備的研究である。まず日本社会における生涯学習の歴史と位置付けを簡略に説明し、本研究の中心となった2つの英語クラスを紹介する。このクラスは、それぞれ15年間に渡り開講され、多くの生徒が何年も継続受講している。次に、この研究の理論的枠組みであり、質的データの分析に用いられた自己決定理論の概要を述べる。分析結果は、自己決定理論の土台の一つである3つの基本的心理欲求「有能感」・「関係

性」・「自律性」を満たすことにより、高齢者の生涯学習の継続を補助する学びの環境を創造できることを示した。

A Brief Overview of Lifelong Learning in Japan

Japan has a long history of lifelong learning that can be traced back to the country's defeat in World War II and the resulting restructuring of its society (Ogden, 2010, p. 6). The origins of the present policy on lifelong learning in Japan begin with the Fundamental Law of Education, introduced in 1947 (Gordon, 1998). The Act of Adult Education evolved from this law in 1949. This act emphasized that learning occurs throughout one's lifetime and was aimed at contributing to the development of a democratic Japanese society (Ogden, 2010, p. 6). The concept of lifelong learning in Japan has continued to develop with the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) by defining an aim to develop a lifelong learning society "... in which everyone can learn anywhere and at any time in their lives and appropriately utilize that learning to cultivate their own individuality and lead a fulfilling life" (MEXT, 2018). Authors Phenninger and Singleton (2019) point out that lifelong learning programs offer seniors opportunities to avoid isolation and stay socially engaged while also helping to maintain and sharpen their mental faculties. Therefore, with its rapidly aging demographic, lifelong learning programs play a significant role in Japanese society.

Noteworthy differences between mature-aged learners and younger learners are the goals of lifelong learning. Rather than trying to advance themselves, as younger learners aim to do, older-aged learners tend to be more focused on mental stimulation or 'anti-aging' activities that offset the aging process. As one student in this study stated, "I want to keep my brain active." A theory that explains this change in focus from positive outcomes to avoidance of negative outcomes is the *life span theory of control* (Heckhausen & Schulz, 1995). For example, Heckhausen and Schulz (1998; cited in Ryan & Dornyei, 2013) propose that there is, "a shift from positive-outcome focus, in terms of striving for developmental growth in young

adults, to a negative-outcome focus, in terms of the avoidance of developmental decline in older adults” (p. 63). Or, as Ryan and Dornyei (2013) state, “As we get older we become more interested in protecting what we have than in seeking further gains” (p. 94). It is this context in which mature-aged students attend lifelong learning classes.

The Framework: Self-determination Theory

Self-determination theory (SDT) is used as a framework to analyze the two classes used in this study. SDT is a theory of human motivation that is concerned with the intrinsic and extrinsic factors that provide motivation and well-being. Ryan and Deci (2000) identify three innate psychological needs of SDT which, when satisfied, lead to enhanced self-motivation and mental health and when obstructed, diminish motivation and well-being. These needs are: relatedness, competence, and autonomy.

Relatedness is a sense of belonging and a feeling of connection with others. When the need for relatedness is satisfied, one feels accepted and looked after by the people that surround him. They have, “a sense of belongingness both with other individuals and with one’s community” (Deci & Ryan, 2002, p. 7). The need for competence is “feeling effective or successful in interacting with one’s environment.” (Kirk, 2010, p. 37). When a person is able to meet challenges appropriate to their ability level, a sense of satisfaction of being effective in one’s environment is cultivated. This feeling of being successful cultivates a feeling of being capable in one’s surroundings. Autonomy refers to self-endorsed behavior in which a person perceives, “one’s self as the origin and regulator of one’s own behavior” (Kirk, 2010, p. 37). This is behavior that the person chooses, agrees with and finds congruent within himself. When a person is autonomous he may become more enthusiastic because he feels empowered about what it is he has chosen to do.

As Ryan and Deci (2000) explain, “Human beings can be proactive and engaged or passive and alienated according largely to the social conditions in which they

develop and function” (p. 68). However, Ryan and Deci (2000) further point out that an understanding of the conditions that foster positive human potential can lead to the development of social environments that optimize human development, performance, and well-being. Likewise, adult education researchers, Dunlap and Grabinger (2003), mention it is important for adult learners to be provided with opportunities, “to develop and enhance their capacity for ‘self-direction, meta-cognitive awareness, and disposition toward lifelong learning’” (p. 9). However, although previous studies have shown the three needs of SDT can be influential for learning (Deci & Vansteenkiste, 2004, Ryan, Khul, Deci, 1997), not much research has been conducted investigating how these needs might apply to retirement-aged lifelong-learners. Therefore, the aim of applying the principles of SDT to this study was to examine the social learning environments where mature-aged students feel their needs for relatedness, competence and autonomy are met. This unique dynamic of both the longevity and success of the two classes utilized in this study offers an ideal setting to examine how to fulfill the needs in promoting life-long learning for mature-aged students.

Method

The Classes

The two English classes at the center of this study were part of a lifelong learning program offered at a university in Yokohama, Japan. The program offers a wide range of hobby-based courses aimed at providing senior students with study and social opportunities. These two English classes have been offered for two semesters for 15 consecutive years.

Materials and Procedure

This qualitative survey, which incorporated 10 open-ended questions, was conducted in 2018. The survey was administered in both English and Japanese. The survey was written in English and translated into Japanese on the reverse side. This gave the participants a choice of which language they used to respond as well as

afforded them translated support. Therefore, students were able to answer in English, Japanese or in both languages. The researchers translated the Japanese responses to ensure accuracy. All participants gave informed consent and the project was cleared by the university administration. The 10 open-ended questions were as follows:

1. What prompted you to join the class?
2. How long have you been coming to class?
3. What motivates you to keep coming?
4. How do you feel about the interpersonal relationships in the class?
5. What do you like/dislike about the class?
6. Do you like choosing your own topics, or would you prefer to use a textbook?
Why?
7. Which lesson activities do you like the most? Circle your answers:
warm up *teacher talking* *changing partners* *partner discussion*
table discussion *whole class discussion* *reading* *writing*
listening *other* _____
8. What is the most challenging/difficult thing about studying English?
9. What other interests/hobbies do you have?
10. Do you have any suggestions that might help the teacher make the class even better?

The Participants

The classes originally began as two similar groups of mostly mixed-level, middle-aged and retired adults, the majority of whom were in their 50s, 60s and 70s (the participants in this study are referred to as mature learners). Tests measuring language proficiency were not administered for this study. Over time, however, the two classes gradually evolved into two separate levels: an afternoon low-level class (hereafter referred to as LL) and an evening high-level class (hereafter referred to as HL). The course descriptions were further re-written over time with student feedback and expectations in mind. These presently state that the LL class uses 70% English

and 30% Japanese, while the HL class is conducted 100% in English. These course titles and descriptions came to effectively stream students into relatively LL and HL level classes.

Analysis

To systematically evaluate the data, the analysis of participants' responses underwent a three-step process. First, questions were categorized. Questions #2 and #9, for example, were paired together to examine information about students' backgrounds. Questions #1 and #3, which asked about participants' reasons for attending the course, were paired with the component of motivation. In the same manner, questions #4 and #7 were paired with the component of relatedness, question #6 was paired with the component of autonomy, and question #8 was paired with the component of competence. Questions #5 and #10 were paired together to collect information about students' satisfaction level and suggestions. Second, the participants' responses to questions were listed along side each other to identify the predominant themes between the two different classes. Third, the number of responses related to the main themes within each component were totaled and inputted into Excel bar charts to examine similarities and differences between the two classes.

Results

Participants' Background

In order to gain an understanding of how long students have been attending the classes, question #2 asked, *How long have you been coming to class?* Table 1 shows the number of participants in each age group for both classes and Table 2 shows the number of years students have been coming to class.

hobbies for students in each class. For instance, the total number of students from each class was similar (LL = 19; HL = 17) and the majority of students from both classes responded that they belonged in the 50, 60 and 70 age group (LL = 17, HL = 13). Eight students from the LL class and four students from the HL class responded that they had been attending the course for at least one year. However, the average number of years the remaining students had been attending their class was nearly nine years for the HL class ($2 + 6 + 8 + 5 + 6 + 16 + 18 = 61 \div 7 = 8.7$) and roughly eight years for the LL class ($4 + 3 + 12 + 10 + 12 + 7 + 9 + 10 = 67 \div 8 = 8.3$). With regard to hobbies and interests, students from both classes shared a wide variety of pastimes. However, the most predominate were cultural pursuits such as cooking, travel, reading and learning English, as well as athletic activities such as swimming, hiking and playing golf. Overall, these responses suggest that the type of students who attend both classes are similar despite holding different levels of English language proficiency.

Motivation

The first and third questions from the questionnaire were aimed at examining students' motivation for attending and coming to class. For the first question, *What prompted you to join the class?* and the third question, *What motivates you to keep coming?*, the three predominate themes identified were related to engaging in English communication (*Eng. Comm.*), the class being interesting (*Interesting*) and class relationships (*Relationships*) and are indicated in Figure 1.

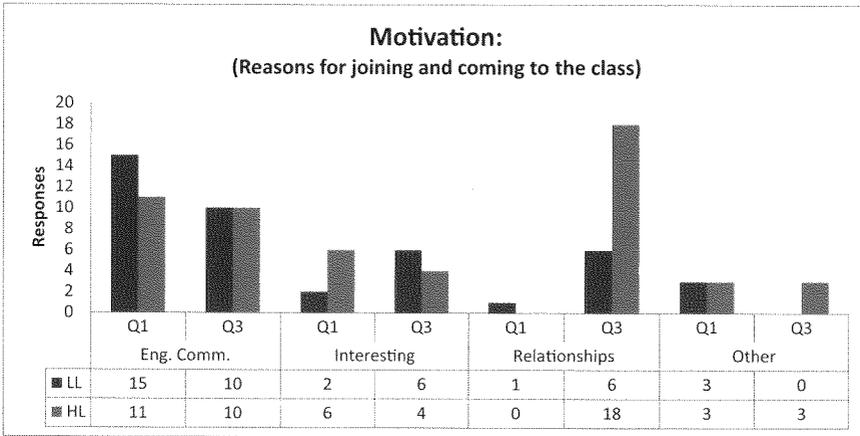


Figure 1: Responses retrieved concerning Motivation (Payton, Dilenschneider, Zidonis, 2019)

Participants’ responses as to why they initially decided to attend the course and why they continued returning to the course share some similarities and differences between the two classes. With regard to the first question, *What prompted you to join the class?*, both classes had several comments expressing a desire to communicate in English. For example, many participants from the LL class expressed they wanted to “study English”, “be a good English speaker” or have the, “opportunity to speak with foreigners.” Similarly, many participants from the HL class stated they wanted to either “retain” or “improve” their English ability. However, with regard to the third question, *What motivates you to keep coming?*, participants from both classes expressed more comments pertaining to class relationships. For instance, several students from both classes specifically mentioned, “meeting new people” and the “relationships” they have with classmates and instructor. Perhaps not surprisingly, the HL class had three times the number of comments related to this theme compared to the LL class (18 > 6). Nonetheless, although communicating in English and engaging in interesting class content remained relatively stable reasons as to why participants decided to come to the course, engaging in relationships established during the course, particularly for the HL class, appears to be an important factor that was not mentioned as motivation for initially attending the course.

Relatedness

Two items from the questionnaire examined students' relationships in the course. Question #4, for example, asked, *How do you feel about the interpersonal relationships in the class?* The three predominate themes identified from students' responses were above average (*Above Avg.*), satisfactory or average (*Avg.*), and below average (*Below Avg.*) and are indicated in Figure 2.

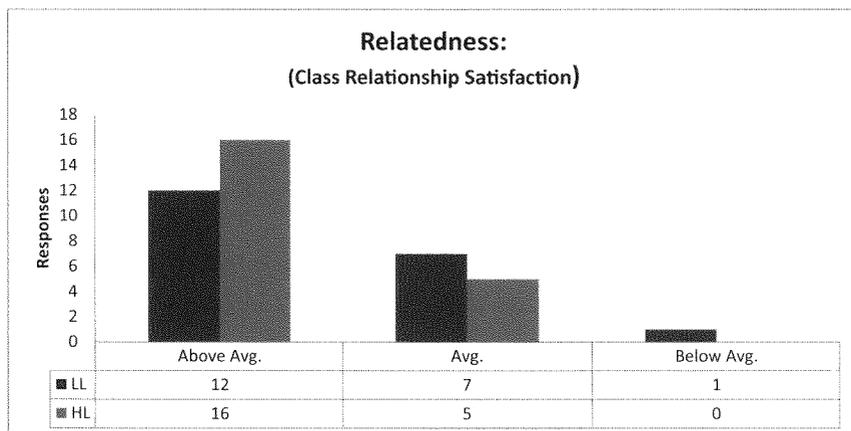


Figure 2: Responses retrieved concerning Interpersonal Relationship Relatedness (Paydon, Dilenschneider, Zidonis, 2019)

The comments concerning the relationships students established in the course for both classes were positive. For instance, the majority of participants in the LL class expressed strong feelings of relatedness with comments such as “excellent”, “very good” and “very friendly.” Likewise, the majority of participants in the HL class expressed terms such as “amazing”, “very good” and “like family.” Only one comment was below average. Although the majority of comments were positive for both classes, due to a higher number of above average comments and no below average comments, it appears the HL class might have stronger interpersonal connections than the LL class.

Further insight with regard to the dynamic of students' relationships within the classes is revealed in question #7 which asked, *Which lesson activities do you like the*

most? The three predominate themes identified from students' responses for this question were activities involving Interactive Communication (*Interactive Comm.*), passive listening (*Passive Listening*), and practicing academic skills (*Skill Practice*) and are indicated in Figure 3.

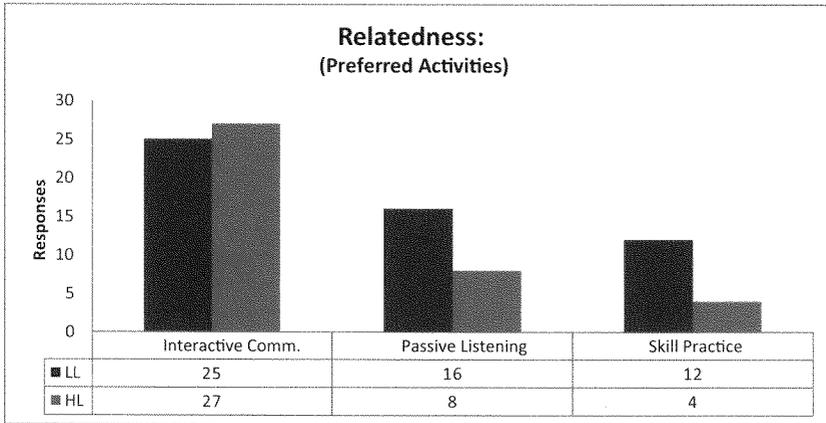


Figure 3: Responses retrieved concerning Preferred Activity Relatedness (Paydon, Dilenschneider, Zidonis, 2019)

The responses concerning the type of activities students enjoyed revealed both some similarities and differences. For example, on one hand, the majority of participants from both the LL and HL classes chose interactive activities such as *changing partners, partner discussions, table discussions, whole class discussions* and *debate* (25, 27). However, the preference for passive listening exercises such as *listening, teacher talking, or watching films* from students belonging to the LL class was twice that of the HL class (16 > 8). In addition, the preference for practicing personal communication skills such as *warm up exercises, reading, writing* and *pronunciation* from the LL class was three times that of students from the HL class (12 > 4). Therefore, although activities that did not require students to actively participate seemed to be more appealing to students belonging to the LL class, the interactive communication activities were popular in both classes and might have contributed to the dynamic of relationships with both classes.

Autonomy

To investigate students' desire to have control or direction in their learning, Question #6 asked, *Do you like choosing your own topics, or would you prefer to use a textbook? Why?* The three themes identified for this question were *Own Topics*, *Text or Topic* and *Only Texts* and are shown in Figure 4.

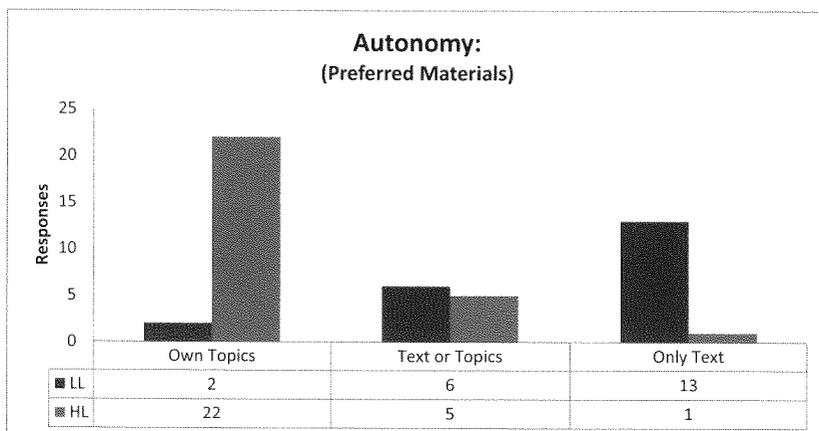


Figure 4: Responses retrieved concerning Autonomy (Paydon, Dilenschneider, Zidonis, 2019)

Comments shared from the HL and LL classes reflected different preferences for materials and topics studied. Particularly, the majority of students in the LL class preferred to study from a selected textbook (13 > 1) because this enabled them to “review” and “prepare” for class. Conversely, students in the HL class, preferred to choose their own topics (22 > 2), and emphasized this with comments such as the “textbook was boring” or that they favored the “flexibility” of not using a textbook.

Competence

To explore how competent participants felt about communicating in English, question #8 asked, *What is the most challenging/difficult thing about studying English?* Overall, the evident skills identified were related to Productive Skills (Speaking and Writing), Receptive Skills (Listening and Reading) and Academic Skills (Vocabulary and Grammar) and are shown in Figure 5.

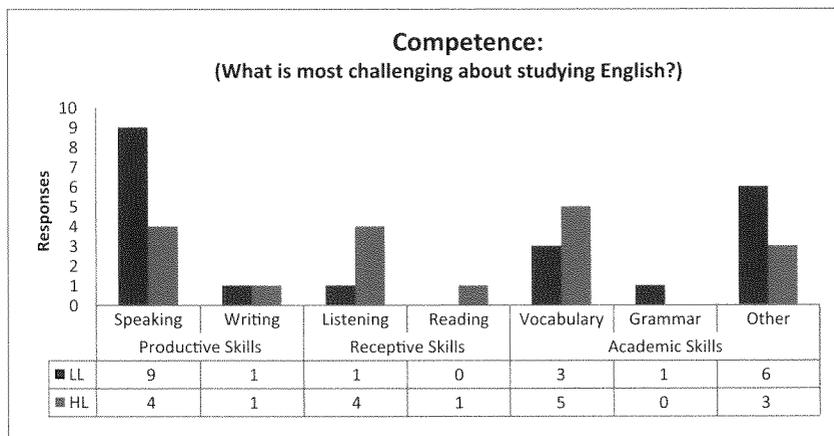


Figure 5: Responses retrieved concerning Competence (Paydon, Dilenschneider, Zidonis, 2019)

The responses retrieved between the two classes share some similarities and differences. For example, with regard to Productive Skills, both the LL and HL classes expressed more difficulty with speaking exercises compared to writing exercises (9 > 1; 4 > 1). Also, with regard to academic skills, both the LL and HL classes expressed some difficulty with learning new vocabulary more than learning grammar (3 > 1; 5 > 0). However, with regard to Receptive Skills, students from the HL class expressed more difficulty than the LL class with listening (4 > 1) and reading (1 > 0). As a result, there appears to be an inverse relationship in that the LL class might be challenged with Productive Skills whereas the HL might be challenged by Receptive Skills.

Student Satisfaction and Suggestions

Question #5 from the questionnaire asked, *What do you like/dislike about your class?* The dominate themes to emerge were related to Positive Relationships, Positive Atmosphere and Learning Dynamic and are revealed in Figure 6.

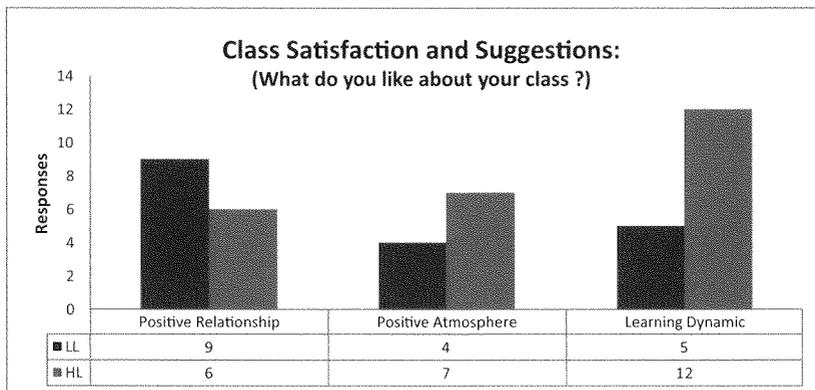


Figure 6 : Responses retrieved concerning Student Satisfaction (Paydon, Dilenschneider, Zidonis, 2019)

Overall, results from students’ responses from both classes suggest they are encouraged by their learning environment. For instance, students from the LL class seem to favor Positive Relationships, and students from both classes commented that they had “very good relationships” with the teacher and other students. Students from both classes seem to favor a Positive Atmosphere. For example, students from the LL class commented that their class was “interesting”, “cheerful”, “fun” and “open-minded”, while students from the HL group mentioned their class was “very good” and had a “friendly atmosphere.” As for the Learning Dynamic, students from both groups expressed liking the “speaking environment”, “help from the teacher”, and the dynamic of “speaking freely without fear of making mistakes.”

To further investigate students’ thoughts and ideas to improve the course, question #10 from the questionnaire asked, *Do you have any suggestions that might help the teacher make the class even better?* The most dominate themes revealed were related to Satisfaction, Discussion, Speaking and Skill Practice and are shown in Figure 7.

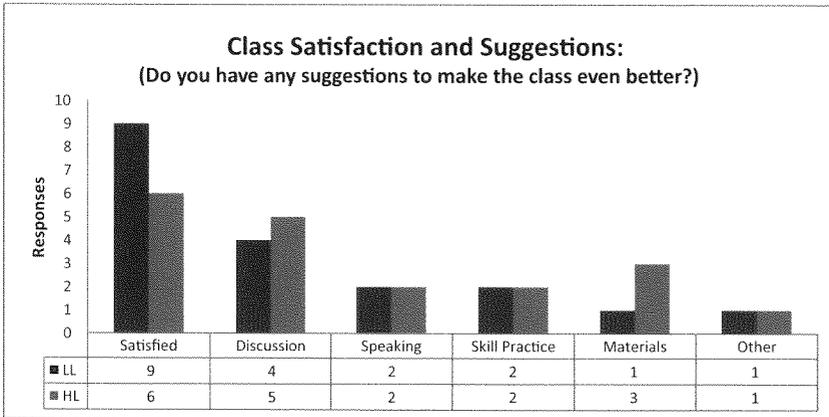


Figure 7: Responses retrieved concerning Student Suggestions (Paydon, Dilenschneider, Zidonis, 2019)

Several students in both classes responded that they were satisfied with their class (LL = 9; HL = 6). Regarding suggestions to improve or make the class better, the LL and HL classes responded that verbal activities such as discussion and speaking exercises (LL: 4 + 2 = 6; HL: 5 + 2 = 7) were more desirable to incorporate into their class compared to focusing on skills such as pronunciation, grammar, or course materials (LL: 2 + 2 + 1 = 5; HL: 2 + 3 + 1 = 6).

Discussion

The two classes at the center of this study have been successful in keeping mature-aged students engaged in a lifelong-learning program. The study hypothesizes that this success can be attributed to the influences of SDT. One of the tenets of SDT is that by focusing on satisfying the innate psychological human needs for relatedness, competence and autonomy, social environments that foster the potential for personal growth and motivation can be created (Ryan & Deci, 2000). When these needs are addressed in lifelong learning classes for mature-aged, a rewarding social environment develops and engagement increases. Each of the SDT needs are considered below.

Relatedness

According to SDT, the need of relatedness is the sense of belonging and the feeling of connection with others. This study found the need for relatedness was strong since the responses from both the LL and HL groups clearly revealed the dynamic of relationships established during the course were positive, or above average. Further examination from the questionnaire revealed both groups yielded more responses for interactive communicative activities compared to activities involving passive listening or learning academic skills. Moreover, activities such as partner discussion, changing partners and table discussion were among the three most popular interactive activities cited by both groups. As a result, there appears to be a strong desire to satisfy the need to relate to others by means of interactive communication. These results suggest the interactive communication activities might cultivate feelings of belonging and could explain why there is a high number of students who return to their classes year after year. Therefore, incorporating interactive communication activities would be beneficial to promote attendance and a sense of belonging for mature-aged learners.

Competence

The need for competence is the need for a person to feel effective in their environment. In this study, the need for competence was reflected in both classes in that both groups expressed a desire to study and improve their English ability. However, the LL class seemed to be more challenged by productive skills, whereas the HL might have been more challenged by receptive skills. These findings suggest that, due to a different proficiency level, the necessary or desired skills either needed or desired might vary from class to class. As a result, it is important to consider the varying skill sets of different classes and how they should be coordinated for mature-aged learners.

Autonomy

The need for Autonomy refers to the type of self-endorsed behavior that makes a

person feel enthusiastic about what it is they have chosen to pursue. This study revealed the need for autonomy is important for mature-aged learners in different ways. The LL class preferred their learning to be guided by the structure of a textbook whereas the HL class preferred more control over their own learning. Therefore, just as different classes might need or desire learning different skills to exercise their competence, it is important to investigate how mature-aged learners prefer to study so that they are neither unchallenged nor overwhelmed in class.

In reviewing and comparing students' responses to the different needs, an interesting point to emerge was the difference in the importance of competence and autonomy between the two classes. For example, on one hand, the clear majority of students in the LL class reported a need for a textbook so that they could preview the content, have a reference in front of them during class, and then review later at home. This would seem important to them in satisfying their need for competence. However, on the other hand, students belonging to the HL class nearly unanimously stated their preference for autonomy in what they study. That is, they want to choose their own topics, and this proved to be more important to them than the ability to preview, review, or the need to have a reference in front of them. Although a need for competence seemed to over-ride the need for autonomy in the LL class, it should be noted that both classes had the freedom to choose between using a textbook or choosing their own content. Therefore, in this way, even the LL class still had some sense of control over how they study. Nevertheless, it appears that there is a hierarchy between the needs of competence and autonomy with regards to the students' linguistic ability. Although this finding could be informative with regards to course design, further research needs to be conducted to confirm these results.

Limitations and Future Research

This study revealed some compelling results with regard to how the needs of relatedness, competence and autonomy might apply to mature-aged learners. Specifically, there is an interesting connection with the apparent hierarchy between

the needs of competence and autonomy and the relationship these needs seem to have with student level. These findings could prove informative in classroom management course design. However, unlike objective research, the nature of qualitative research can be problematic in that it is subjected to the judgement of the researchers who interpret the data. To remedy this issue, future studies might consider a number of possibilities to expand both the collection and interpretation of students' responses. For instance, a larger number of open-ended questions specifically related to the needs of relatedness, competence and autonomy can serve to find more detailed and in-depth information. In addition, follow-up interviews might be beneficial as the opportunity for students to express themselves verbally may compensate for limitations they might have in expressing themselves in writing or allow researchers to cross-examine data for accuracy.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study revealed that applying SDT to lifelong learning classes, and paying particular attention to the students' needs for relatedness, competence and autonomy appears to be beneficial in creating learning environments that keep senior citizens engaged in lifelong learning classes. This study further demonstrates that an understanding of SDT can help teachers to create classroom environments in which mature-aged students can feel a sense of belonging, feel comfortably challenged, and feel a sense of control over how and what they study.

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