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Beyond the Grade: The Impact of Teacher Immediacy on Psychological Safety and Intrinsic Motivation among Japanese Tertiary Learners

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Abstract

Institutional language education often emphasizes extrinsic motivators, such as grades and credits, which can inadvertently stifle authentic learner engagement. This research investigates the behavioral transition from extrinsic goal-orientation to intrinsic motivation through the lens of Self-Determination Theory (SDT). Analyzing a robust dataset of over 300 unique responses from two longitudinal surveys at a Japanese university, this practitioner inquiry examines how teacher immediacy behaviors—including personalized feedback, community-building warm-ups, and the provision of digital autonomy—influence student perceptions of psychological safety. The study utilizes a mixed-methods approach to categorize qualitative student feedback into psychological constructs of relatedness, autonomy, and competence. Preliminary quantitative findings indicate a significant correlation between perceived instructor support and a student's willingness to take linguistic risks, even among learners who initially reported purely grade-driven motivations. Qualitative results further highlight that a classroom climate that "normalizes failure" acts as a critical mediator for sustained engagement. The paper concludes by offering a behavioral framework for instructors to shift classroom culture from compliance-based performance to authentic language acquisition. These findings provide empirical support for integrating compassionate pedagogy as a scientifically grounded strategy to improve learning outcomes in EFL contexts.

Keywords: Behavioral psychology; EFL pedagogy; Language acquisition; Learner autonomy; Self-determination theory