What do students want: Course-level autonomy-support and structure instructional preferences.

○Luke K. Fryer, Kaori Nakao#, Charles J. Anderson#
(Kyushu Sangyo University)

Background: Research has demonstrated that students’ are optimally engaged in learning when classroom instruction provides both sufficient autonomy-support and structure. An important component of autonomy-support entails teachers being able to “take the student’s perspective” by understanding students’ abilities and preferences. In the context of learning within Higher Education, where student learning orientations are likely to be relatively static, it is especially important for instruction to begin with a firm understanding of students’ viewpoint.

Aims: Firstly, the current study explores students’ preference for instruction, within the Autonomy-support and Structure framework, within compulsory non-major specific University classes. Secondly this study explores teachers’ self-reported instructional style and their perceptions of what students’ want with regard to instruction. Finally, alignment between teachers and students is examined.

Methods: An unstructured qualitative investigation of students’ preferences for instruction is employed in the development of a quantitative instrument that was completed by all first and second year students studying within the research institution’s compulsory English-language program. All instructors in the same context completed an open-ended survey regarding their instructional style. A purposeful sample of the English teachers was interviewed to clarify and expand on survey results.

Results: Three components of students’ preferences for classroom instruction were explored and then validated through Exploratory and Confirmatory Factor Analysis: autonomy-support, structure and controlled structure. The validated latent variables were included in a lagged Structural Equation Model (SEM) exploring the effect of prior achievement, self-concept, language ability and attendance on students’ preferences, while students’ interest in English was explored for its non-lagged relationship with students’ preferences. Interest, self-concept and achievement all demonstrated significant relationships with students’ preferences. A follow-up Latent Profile Analysis (LPA) of students’ instructional preferences resulted in two broadly consistent groups of learners. Qualitative results from teacher interviews examine the fine grain relationship that exists between teachers’ perceptions of students’ motivation and teachers self-reported use of structure in general and structure that is clearly controlling in nature.

Conclusion: SEM, which included the validated latent instructional preference variables, indicated that interest in particular, may play a powerful role in students’ preference for instruction. The simple approach to LPA employed here has demonstrated that two distinct groups of students underlie the sample: Students who want some autonomy-support, structure and controlled structure and those who want even more of all three. Qualitative findings from teacher interviews suggest that their self-reported instruction is strongly related to their perceptions of student motivation.