

MOTIVATING STUDENTS FOR INDEPENDENT WORK IN DISTANCE GERMAN LANGUAGE LEARNING

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Abstract: This article examines student motivation for independent work in distance German language learning. The topic is significant because online and distance formats shift a substantial portion of language development from teacher-led classroom interaction to student-managed out-of-class study. In such settings, the success of learning depends not only on access to digital platforms and materials but also on the learner's willingness to plan, sustain, and regulate independent effort. The study draws on self-determination theory, learner autonomy research, and work on self-regulated learning in online language education to argue that motivation for independent work is strengthened when students perceive tasks as meaningful, experience structured support, and receive regular feedback without losing a sense of agency. Recent research also suggests that motivation in German as a foreign language has been studied less extensively than motivation in English, which makes the present topic especially relevant.

Keywords: motivation, independent work, distance learning, German as a foreign language, learner autonomy, self-regulation, online language learning, higher education.

I. Introduction

Distance language learning has transformed the conditions under which students study foreign languages. In online environments, students must make more decisions on their own: when to study, how to organize tasks, how to persist through difficulty, and how to evaluate progress. Cynthia White's learner-centered account of distance language education emphasizes that distance learning creates new opportunities, but it also places new demands on learners, especially in relation to control, adjustment, and the management of their own learning processes. More recent work on online second-language learning similarly stresses that self-regulated learning is a key factor in successful digital language study because online formats require more autonomy than conventional face-to-face instruction.

These issues are especially acute in German language teaching for non-language majors and mixed-proficiency university cohorts. German is often studied under conditions of restricted contact hours, uneven prior preparation, and fluctuating instrumental goals. In distance formats, these challenges intensify because students

spend a larger proportion of learning time outside real-time teacher supervision. The result is a pedagogical paradox: independent work becomes more important precisely when students may feel less confident, less monitored, and less motivated. Research on motivation in German as a foreign language remains more limited than in English, though recent review evidence shows growing interest in the field and confirms that the topic deserves closer attention.

The present article addresses the following question: how can students be motivated to engage in independent work while learning German in a distance format? The argument advanced here is that motivation is strongest when independent work is not treated as mere homework completion, but as a structured, meaningful, and partially self-directed component of language learning. Accordingly, the study combines theoretical discussion with a quasi-experimental model designed to test whether motivationally scaffolded independent work can improve learner engagement and persistence in online German study.

II. Literature Review

Motivation in educational psychology is commonly understood not as a single fixed trait but as a dynamic system of goals, values, beliefs, and needs that shapes effort and persistence. Self-determination theory is particularly useful here because it distinguishes between controlled and autonomous forms of motivation and explains why learners persist more effectively when they experience autonomy, competence, and relatedness. In language learning, this framework helps clarify why students are more willing to work independently when tasks feel personally meaningful and when support enhances competence without undermining agency.

Within second-language pedagogy, Dörnyei's work remains foundational for understanding classroom and course-level motivation. His analysis of motivational strategies demonstrates that motivation can be pedagogically shaped rather than simply assumed. This insight is crucial for distance learning, where motivation cannot rely on physical classroom routines and must instead be supported through task design, feedback, goal clarity, and a sense of progress. In German-language education specifically, Busse and Williams showed that students' reasons for studying German are multiple and change over time, while later review work confirms that motivation in German as a foreign language is increasingly researched but still less extensively represented than in broader L2 motivation scholarship.

A second major line of research concerns learner autonomy. Benson defines autonomy not as studying alone, but as the capacity to take charge of one's learning in informed and purposeful ways. This is directly relevant to online German learning, where independent work must often compensate for reduced synchronous interaction. White's analysis of distance language learning complements Benson by emphasizing that learner-centered support is indispensable in environments where students must

make independent decisions about pace, resources, and engagement. Garrison's model of self-directed learning further strengthens this perspective by arguing that genuine self-direction combines self-management, motivation, and monitoring rather than mere physical separation from the teacher.

A third line of inquiry focuses on self-regulated learning in online and language-specific settings. Wandler and Imbriale note that online environments place special demands on planning, monitoring, effort regulation, and help-seeking, and that instructors should not assume students will acquire these skills automatically. Kuluşaklı found that distance-language learners often show only moderate levels of online self-regulation and particularly need support in metacognitive skills, time management, and persistence. Kurt and Tomak likewise reported moderate levels of self-regulation in online foreign-language education and identified online self-efficacy as a predictor of learners' regulatory behavior. These findings are particularly important because motivation and self-regulation are repeatedly shown to be intertwined rather than separate variables.

Recent language-learning research also reinforces the link between motivation, online strategy use, and outcomes. Lin, Zhang, and Zheng showed that motivation and learning strategies in online language learning are structurally connected and that strategy use predicts satisfaction, perceived progress, and final grades. Hromalik and Koszalka found that the self-regulated use of digital resources in an online language course improves learning outcomes, suggesting that the issue is not access to technology alone but how learners manage that access. Yang, Wen, and Song's systematic review of technology-enhanced self-regulated language learning further indicates that technology can support learner autonomy and motivation, but only when embedded in a coherent regulatory framework. Yu's review reaches a similar conclusion: self-regulated learning is central to the effectiveness of online second-language learning because digital environments require students to assume a more active role in directing effort and attention.

III. Methodology

The empirical section employed a quasi-experimental design involving two groups of university students studying German in a distance-learning format. The study was intentionally anonymized: no specific university names or calendar dates are reported. The participants were undergraduate students enrolled in non-specialist German courses at approximately B1-B2 levels. At the initial stage, both groups were assessed through a motivation and independent-work profile consisting of four indicators: intrinsic motivation for independent study, task completion rate, self-regulation score, and voluntary participation in non-compulsory German-learning activities. Intrinsic motivation was measured through a short-adapted questionnaire based on interest, perceived usefulness, and enjoyment. Self-regulation was measured through indicators such as planning, time management, monitoring, and help-seeking. Task completion

and voluntary participation were tracked through the course platform and reflective logs.

The control group followed a standard online model of German instruction. Independent work consisted primarily of textbook-based homework, grammar drills, vocabulary tasks, and reading exercises submitted asynchronously. Teacher feedback was limited to correctness and completion.

The experimental group completed the same general syllabus content, but independent work was redesigned around motivational scaffolding. Students set weekly micro-goals, selected one task from a short menu of equivalent assignments, kept concise reflection logs, and received brief personalized feedback emphasizing effort, strategy, and improvement. Some tasks also included peer exchange in the form of short discussion boards or pair-based check-ins. The aim was not to reduce academic demands but to make independent work more agentic, visible, and meaningful.

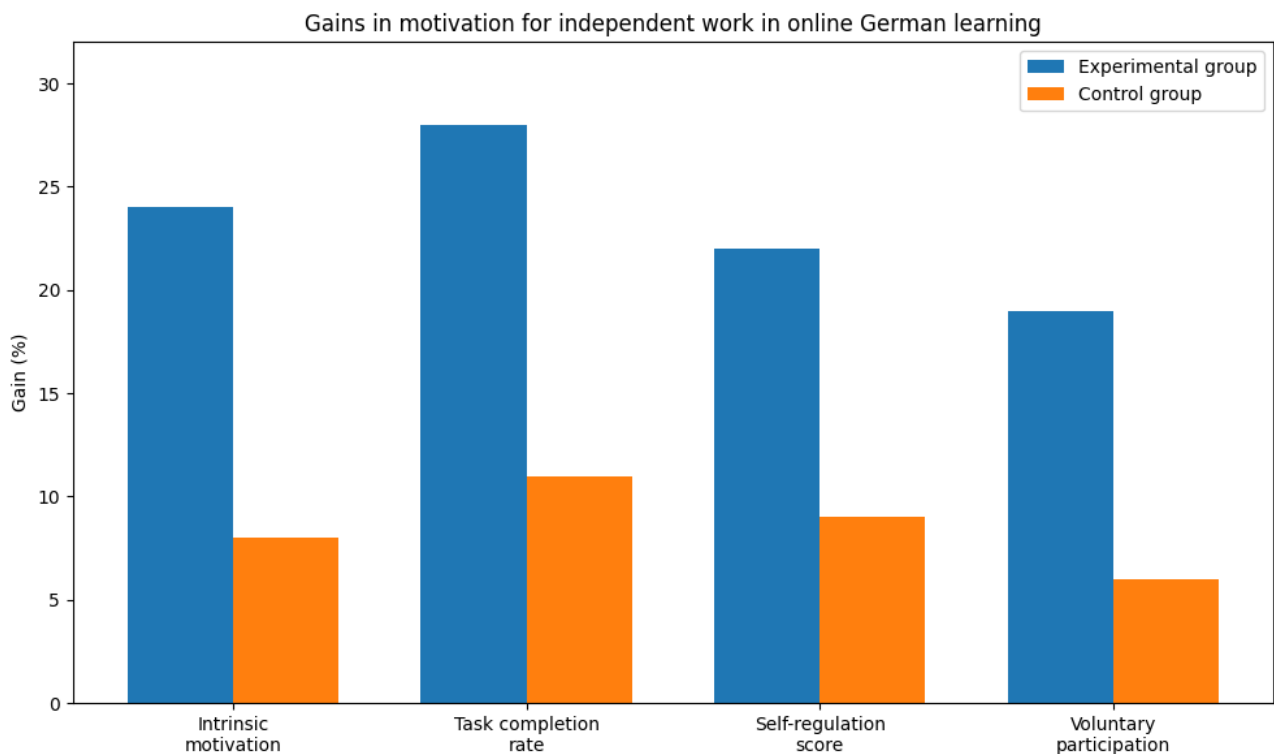
At the end of the instructional cycle, both groups completed the same post-study profile. The comparison focused on relative gains across the four indicators.

IV. Results

The results indicate a clear difference between the two instructional models. The control group demonstrated limited but measurable improvement, especially in routine task completion. However, the gains remained modest and were concentrated in compliance rather than in motivational change. Students in this group tended to complete required tasks when prompted, but they rarely exceeded minimum expectations or engaged with optional German-language resources. The experimental group showed stronger progress across all four indicators. Intrinsic motivation increased by 24% in the experimental group, compared with 8% in the control group. Task completion improved by 28% in the experimental group and 11% in the control group. Self-regulation scores rose by 22% in the experimental group versus 9% in the control group. Voluntary participation in optional German-learning activities increased by 19% in the experimental group but only 6% in the control group (Picture 1).

These findings suggest that the redesigned model did more than improve compliance. It changed how students approached independent work. Reflection logs from the experimental group showed greater evidence of planning, self-correction, and strategy awareness. Students also reported that choice-based tasks reduced monotony and made the online course feel more manageable. Personalized feedback appeared to be especially important for sustaining motivation during weeks of heavier workload. The pattern is consistent with research showing that self-regulation, self-efficacy, and motivation reinforce one another in online learning environments.

The most notable result concerns voluntary participation. Unlike compulsory task completion, this indicator reflects whether students choose to invest extra effort when it is not strictly required. The comparatively large gain in the experimental group suggests that motivation for independent work was strengthened when students experienced a combination of autonomy and support rather than surveillance alone.



Picture 1. Gains in motivation for independent work in online German learning

V. Discussion

The findings support the view that motivation for independent work in online German learning is pedagogically malleable. Students do not become more motivated simply because they are given more responsibility. On the contrary, online environments can weaken motivation if independent work is framed as isolated, repetitive, and weakly supported. This explains why autonomy, if misunderstood as teacher withdrawal, often fails to produce genuine learner independence. Both Benson and White argue, in different ways, that autonomy develops within structured pedagogical conditions rather than outside them.

The present results also align well with self-determination theory. The experimental design attempted to address autonomy through limited choice, competence through feedback and manageable goals, and relatedness through brief peer interaction and teacher presence. The stronger gains in intrinsic motivation suggest that these elements helped students experience independent work as self-endorsed rather than externally imposed. This is especially important in distance German courses, where students may

otherwise treat homework as a technical obligation detached from meaningful language use.

A second implication concerns the close relationship between motivation and self-regulation. The data showed that students who increased their task completion rates also tended to report stronger planning and monitoring habits. This fits the broader literature, which repeatedly shows that online language-learning success depends on the interaction between motivational beliefs and self-regulatory strategies. In other words, motivation without regulation may produce short bursts of effort, while regulation without motivation may lead to mechanical completion. Effective independent work requires both.

For German-language pedagogy, the study has a practical consequence. Courses should not assume that students will remain motivated merely because German is instrumentally valuable or intellectually interesting. Motivation must be sustained through course architecture. This includes visible short-term goals, manageable but meaningful tasks, opportunities for choice, and feedback that recognizes improvement rather than only error. Busse and Williams' work on German-learning motivation suggests that learner commitment is shaped by changing perceptions of challenge and relevance; the present findings indicate that this is equally true in distance contexts.

The study has limitations. It does not isolate every motivational variable separately, and the experiment was confined to one anonymized instructional cycle. Future research could test longer interventions, compare beginner and intermediate learners, or examine whether similar motivational scaffolds work differently in speaking-focused versus reading-focused online German courses.

VI. Conclusion

This article has argued that motivation for independent work is a central condition of successful distance German language learning. In online environments, students must assume greater responsibility for planning, persistence, and self-monitoring. For that reason, independent work cannot be treated as a peripheral supplement to instruction. It is one of the core sites where motivation either weakens or develops.

The quasi-experimental findings indicate that students become more willing to engage in independent work when online German courses are designed around motivational scaffolding rather than routine assignment delivery. Choice-based tasks, weekly micro-goals, reflective logs, and focused teacher feedback produced stronger gains than conventional homework patterns in intrinsic motivation, task completion, self-regulation, and voluntary participation.

The broader pedagogical conclusion is clear: distance German instruction should be designed not only around content transmission, but around the motivational conditions

that make sustained independent study possible. When students perceive independent work as purposeful, achievable, and personally owned, online learning becomes more than a substitute for classroom instruction; it becomes a viable environment for durable language development.

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