

Effective Strategies for Motivating L2 Learners

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1. Introduction

Terrell H Bell, former US Secretary of Education in the 1980s was once quoted to have said, “There are three things to remember about education. The first one is motivation. The second one is motivation. The third one is motivation” (quoted in McNerney and Liem, 2008:11). What he said about the importance of motivation is something that every teacher would readily acknowledge. Motivated learners are more enthusiastic, goal-oriented, committed, persistent and confident in their learning. They are willing to work hard to achieve their goal and they do not easily give up until they achieve that goal. This is true whether we talk about motivation in general education or in language learning contexts.

In second language learning (L2) contexts in particular, teachers know from their experience that motivation plays a key role in learning. They know that students with higher motivation are likely to be more successful than those with lower motivation. They also know that they themselves play a major role in creating and fostering motivation in the classroom. Indeed, some of them are very good at motivating their students, but others may still need to sharpen their motivating skills.

2. What is motivation?

Motivation is concerned with the questions of why people choose to do an activity over another, how much effort they are going to put in to do the activity and how long they will be participating in the activity (Dörnyei, 2001). When students choose to participate enthusiastically in a language lesson and are willing to extend sufficient efforts even when the activity is challenging, we know that they are motivated to learn and are likely to take in more and remember more from the lesson. Those who are not as motivated do not take part in the lesson voluntarily, do not put in the required effort and give up easily when the task gets harder to do.

The definition of motivation above is quite simple and easy to understand. But when we take it one step further and try to flesh out the sources of student motivation, we are likely to have a wide range of answers, including the following:

- Students’ attitude towards the target language. Students who have a positive attitude towards the target language, its culture and community, and who appreciate the social and economic benefits associated with it, tend to possess a higher level of motivation.
- Their perception about the utility of the target language in the community. Students feel more motivated if what they learn in the classroom can be put to immediate use outside the classroom.
- Their sense of competence in the target language. Students’ motivation goes up when they feel that they have the required skills and abilities to perform a task.
- Their perception of the value of the language lessons. Students feel motivated when they can see the value of what they are learning.

- Their perception about the enjoyment level of the lesson. Students become more motivated when they find the lessons intrinsically interesting and enjoyable, where they learn things that they like and want to learn, and not because they have to.
- Their classroom learning environments. When the classroom is stress-free and students can participate without fear of being ridiculed when they make pronunciation or grammar mistakes, they tend to be more motivated to learn.
- Their teacher's personality and teaching effectiveness. Students tend to have higher motivation if their teacher is warm, humorous and caring, and who can teach well.

3. Is motivation a 'student' or 'teacher' problem?

Motivation is perhaps the single most important factor affecting the outcome of L2 learning. Indeed, Dörnyei (2001) says that given sufficient motivation, most L2 learners can acquire a working knowledge of the language. He further maintains that L2 learners' ultimate success or failure is determined by their sustained 'enthusiasm, commitment and persistence' (p, 5) in the long and drawn out process of language learning. But whose responsibility is it to ensure that students' motivation and levels of engagement remain high during the learning process?

The answer seems to depend on whether we see motivation as a fixed or dynamic construct. When we see motivation as a fixed entity, we simply describe our students as being either motivated or unmotivated. In other words, we see motivation to learn as being essentially a 'student problem' (Johnson, 2008). The students are responsible for their own motivation and there is not much we can do to change it. However, if we believe that motivation is a dynamic construct and can change depending on the learning situation in the classroom or school, then it should no longer be seen as a student problem, but should be viewed more as a 'teacher problem' (Johnson, 2008). When we see motivation as a teacher problem, we acknowledge that there are many classroom-specific factors that the teacher can exploit in order to foster student motivation. This however is not to say that students have little or no responsibility to work on their motivation levels. They do, because ultimately motivation is the responsibility of the individual students.

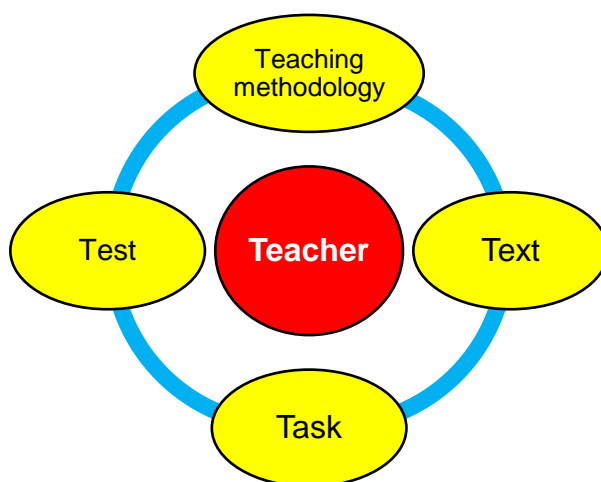
The view that motivation is dynamic and changeable is more in line with recent theorizing on motivation (Dörnyei, 2001, 2012; Linnenbrink & Pintrich, 2002). As Linnenbrink and Pintrich (2002) point out, 'motivation is not a stable trait of an individual, but is more situated, contextual and domain-specific'. Thus, students may be motivated in a science class, but not in a language class or vice versa. Within a language class, students may be more motivated in a reading class than in a conversation class. We also often see students showing a higher level of motivation when taught by Teacher A, for example, but not so when taught by Teacher B.

The dynamic view of motivation also means that during the course of their studies, students' motivation does not stay at the same level; it fluctuates, going up and down in response to changes in learner internal as well as external factors (Dörnyei, 2001). What often happens in L2 classes is that students normally start off with some initial motivation which gets strengthened as time goes by because they find the lessons cognitively and affectively fulfilling; but it is also possible that the initial motivation dies down because they find the lessons uninteresting or frustratingly demanding. Sometimes, their motivation drops to a low level simply because the prolonged learning activities tire them out. It is rare to observe students whose levels of motivation remains high throughout the whole semester, much less throughout the whole school year.

4. The 5 Ts of Motivation

Instead of looking at the myriad of factors that can affect student motivation within the school context, we should focus on classroom specific factors that teachers are most familiar with and which they can make the most impact on. Research on motivation tells us that the classroom environment, our behaviour and actions in the classroom, our relationship with the students, the way we teach in class, and how we structure our lessons, and the way we assess our students all have huge implications on student motivation. In this paper, these classroom specific factors are referred to as the 5 Ts of motivation as shown in Figure 1 below (Renandya, in press).

Figure 1: The 5 Ts of Motivation



At the heart of the model is the teacher who plays a critical role in ensuring that students are motivated and continue to be committed in their learning throughout the tenure of their studies. The next sections discuss the 5 Ts of motivation in greater details.

5. T1 = The Teacher

Almost everything about the teacher, including his or her personal characteristics, can have a big impact on student motivation. Many studies on good language teachers have identified general teacher characteristics deemed to be desirable and which tend to generate positive appraisals of L2 learning in the classroom. The following characteristics are often cited as being associated with good teachers (Borg, 2006; Brophy, 1998; Dörnyei, 2001; Miller, 2012):

- Enthusiastic. Enthusiastic teachers love their subject matter, and teach it with great passion. Their enthusiasm is infectious and acts as an open invitation for the students to enjoy learning the subject matter as much as the teachers enjoy teaching it.
- Friendly. Students appreciate having teachers who are friendly and approachable, those who they can talk to not only about school work, but also about other things related to their personal and social lives.
- Caring. Students remember their teachers who are caring and show sincere concern of their learning and also their general well-being. Students also feel safe, knowing that the teachers are there to help them when they encounter learning problems.

- Humorous. Humorous teachers can make a dry subject interesting. Good teachers use humour skilfully to make their lessons more appealing and make the key points of the lessons more memorable by using anecdotes and hilarious stories etc.
- Fair. Students have a deep respect for teachers who treat every student fairly and who do not practice favouritism. In class, these teachers give equal attention to every single student without regard to their ability level, gender, race, ethnicity or social backgrounds.
- Encouraging and patient. Students enjoy having teachers who are encouraging and does not show any sign of unhappiness when students make the same mistakes frequently, and who are always available to provide extra help even after normal school hours.

There are also L2-specific characteristics that students value and expect good teachers to possess. In outer and expanding circle countries where English is normally taught by bilingual teachers of English, the following characteristics are usually expected of them (Brown, 2012; McKay, 2002)

- Can serve as models of good users of English
- Can serve as models of successful learners of English
- Are knowledgeable about English
- Can code switch when necessary
- Understand the students' L2 learning needs
- Are sympathetic towards students' L2 learning problems
- Use socially and culturally appropriate teaching methods
- Understand the goal of English instruction

Effective teachers have deep understanding of motivational factors that can enhance students' learning experiences in the classroom. They plan and deliver their lessons based on sound motivational principles and deliberately infuse these principles in the activities and tasks in the classroom. Listed below are principles derived from mainstream motivational theories.

1. Students are likely to be more motivated when they have a high expectancy of success in completing the task and when they value the outcome. This principle is informed by the expectancy value theory (Brophy, 1998).
2. Students' motivation increases if they feel that they have the ability to do a certain task and are confident of successfully completing the task. In other words, the level of their self-efficacy determines the amount of effort they will put in and the extent to which they persist in their effort. This principle is based on the self-efficacy theory (Bandura, 1997).
3. Students who are intrinsically motivated, who perform tasks because they want to, tend to work harder and achieve more success compared to those who are extrinsically motivated, and who do things because they have to. This is based on Ryan and Deci's (2000) self-determination theory.
4. Students become more motivated when they feel good about themselves as a result of their being able to complete a task. Because of this they tend to do things that increase their personal value and worth and avoid face-threatening activities as these can undermine their self-worth (Covington, 1998).

Students become more motivated when they feel good about themselves as a result of their being able to complete a task. Because of this they tend to do things that increase their personal value and worth and avoid face-threatening activities as these can undermine their self-worth. This self-worth theory of motivation (Covington, 1998) is particularly relevant for adult learners of English who often have to participate in potentially face-threatening activities.

6. T2 = Teaching Methodology

Motivating teachers are knowledgeable about different kinds of teaching methods. But more importantly, they have deep understanding about how these methods work with different groups of learners in different learning contexts. They are not dogmatic about certain kinds of methods and do not subscribe to a single method. They believe that there is no single best method that will work with every single student.

6.1 Instructional skills

Teaching is more than just making decisions about which specific teaching methods to adopt. Teaching is a complex process that involves making decisions about what we want to teach, how we want to teach it, and how we know that we have been successful in teaching it. What distinguishes effective from ineffective teachers often lies in their skills in teaching their daily lessons. Effective teachers are very skilful in:

- formulating the objective of the lesson. Effective teachers think through the objective carefully, making sure that the objective relates to the overall plan of the language programme and is formulated in ways that are achievable and measurable.
- choosing and organizing learning activities. Effective teachers carefully select and structure learning activities that support the attainment of the lesson objectives in ways that engage students' interest and attention and stimulate their motivation.
- evaluating how well the lesson went. Effective teachers use a variety of instruments, both formal and informal, to find out how much or how little students have learned from the lesson.

6.2 Keeping student motivation level high

It's a well-known fact that student motivation ebbs and flows over time. In fact, in many language classes, motivation tends to flow initially and then ebbs quite considerably as time passes by. One of the reasons for this is that acquiring a foreign or second language takes time, and it's often hard to keep student's enthusiasm and commitment high throughout this lengthy process. What then are some of the strategies that teachers can use to keep students sufficiently motivated and engaged in the language learning process? I discuss below several strategies that teachers have reported using to keep their students interest levels relatively high.

- **Choice.** Choice is a key element of motivation. Students feel unmotivated because they often are not given a choice in their learning process. Everything seems to have already been chosen for them to do in class, e.g., the teaching materials are fixed, the tasks and activities are set in stone, etc. While we can't give students total freedom to choose what they want to do in class, we can give students some choices. For example, in a speaking class we can let students choose a topic from a list and give them the freedom to work in pairs, in groups of three or four, etc.
- **Variety.** Our teaching methods may be intrinsically interesting, but over time students may get bored and lose interest. Teachers should therefore have a large repertoire of teaching methods and consciously vary them to avoid student boredom. For example, a teacher-led predicting activity is a popular technique that teachers use regularly during the pre-reading phase of a reading lesson. But this is just one of the numerous other schema-activating techniques that we have available. There are probably more than 50 activities of this type that teachers can use.
- **Novelty.** Novelty can enliven students' motivation. We can introduce a few surprises in our lesson so that the structure and flow of the lesson becomes less predictable. Too much novelty of course can have an adverse effect and bring too much unpredictability.

- **Curiosity.** People are naturally curious. But we often do not provide enough room for students to be curious in the language lesson. For example, we tend to give the rules of certain grammar points, instead of getting students to work out the rules for themselves. The teaching materials we use are already packed with complete, self-contained information, leaving no room for students to speculate, predict, hypothesize, or use their imagination.

7. T3 = The Text

The text here refers to language teaching materials (print and electronic; oral and written) that teachers use in the language classroom, including course books and their accompanying resource materials (e.g., CD, DVD), teacher-developed materials or any other supplementary materials. Instructional materials play an important role in the language classroom. It is hard to imagine a language class without instructional materials because much of the tasks and activities of a language lesson are often organized around course books or other instructional materials.

Given the important role of instructional materials in the language learning process, it is essential that the materials we use are interesting and motivating. Not much learning can occur if the materials are linguistically, cognitively and affectively unappealing to the learners. The following questions can be used to gauge the interest level of the instructional materials we use:

- Are the materials pitched at the right linguistic levels, not too easy and not too demanding?
- Do the materials contain language items that attract students' attention?
- Are the contents appropriate for the students you are teaching?
- Are the materials emotionally stimulating and engaging?
- Do the materials help the learners make personally meaningful connections with their own lives?
- Do the materials help the learners make connections with the lives of the people in their surrounding?
- Do the materials provide positive learning experiences and promote students' self-esteem and self-confidence?
- Do the materials provide ample opportunity for students to learn what they really need or want to learn?
- Do the materials help learners to see the connections between what they learn in class with what they need in the real world?

The affective dimension of our materials is particularly important in language learning. ELT materials development experts such as Tomlinson and Masuhara (2004) say that "materials should engage the emotions of the learner. Laughter, joy, excitement, sorrow and anger can promote learning; neutrality cannot" (p. 6). This type of materials allows learners to process the contents and language of the materials more deeply, resulting in the kind of learning that is durable and long lasting.

8. T4 = The Task

Language tasks and activities serve pedagogical purposes, but unfortunately not all of them are perceived to be useful, interesting and engaging by the students. Indeed, students often associate language learning tasks and activities with classroom chores, things that they have to do to fill in time, or worse, for teachers to 'take a break' while students are doing some work either individually

or in groups. In addition, students can't always see the value of the activities (e.g., tasks that require students to change active to passive sentences) and often find the tasks too challenging (e.g., answering comprehension questions based on a reading passage written way above their proficiency level), which reduces the chances of success in completing the tasks.

When the tasks that we design for classroom use are both interesting and enjoyable, and well-aligned with the skills and experience of the students, there is more than a fair chance that our tasks will be both useful (i.e., they have direct impact on language learning) and motivating (i.e., they create the necessary conditions for students to be cognitively and affectively engaged). Here're some ideas to make our tasks more engaging:

- **Optimal challenge.** Tasks can be too easy or too challenging from a linguistic point of view, which we know students will not find exciting. Tasks should be designed in such a way that they provide an optimal challenge, i.e., they stretch students' linguistic knowledge to a new level of sophistication. Tasks should also provide optimal challenge from a cognitive point of view. This is particularly important when we work in older learners of English. Borg (2006) for example reported that we tend to use tasks that are cognitively undemanding with cognitively mature learners of English. This of course can undermine these learners' motivation.
- **Interesting tasks.** What is interesting for the teachers may not be so for students. One simple way is simply to find what kinds of tasks are interesting for which group of students. Teachers can design a simple questionnaire at the beginning of the term to get an idea about what the students find interesting to do. To meet the different needs of the students, it is possible for the teacher to give students choices in terms of the kinds of tasks they want to do during lessons.
- **Optimal learner involvement.** Tasks that engage the affective, cognitive and social dimensions of learning are more likely to be motivating. When the task makes students feel appreciated and comfortable during task work and when the task allows them to express their thoughts and opinions in a cohesive and supportive group environment using whatever language they have available without feeling intimidated, they will learn most for the task.
- **Healthy competition.** Adding an element of competition in the learning tasks can be very motivating as people are naturally competitive. We don't however want to create unhealthy competition in which some students win and others lose. Those who lose may feel resentful, and if they lose frequently as is the case with those with lower ability levels in our class, they will soon lose interest in learning.
- **Clear and tangible outcome.** We need to create tasks that have a clear and tangible outcome. For example, students may be ask to a brochure that features the strengths of their school and have this final product posted in the school website. Once the students understand what is expected of them in terms of the task outcome, they will become more engaged and do the utmost to produce the final product.

9. T5 = The Test

Many teachers that I have worked with often complain that our education system tends to give too much attention to testing and examinations. Our teaching, they say, is often overshadowed or even dictated by tests and examinations. We teach in order to prepare students for the tests and examinations. In some places, the situation has become so bad that people actually talk about a culture of learning where testing has become the dominant mode of learning in the classroom. Not surprisingly, such an examination-oriented classroom becomes a source of frustration, fear of

failure, feeling of anxiety, and a fertile breeding ground for the development of excessive spirit of competition (instead of healthy competition and cooperation) and other negative feelings and attitudes towards learning.

I am not suggesting that we do away with tests and examinations completely. Tests and other forms of assessments are useful teaching tools that provide us with useful information about many things that we have done in our teaching:

- They can give us information about students' achievements relative to the curricular goals
- They can give us information about their learning progress (e.g., mid-term or end-of-year tests)
- They can help us identify areas of student weaknesses so that remedial actions can be taken
- They can provide useful information about students' ability levels which can be used for placement purposes
- Etc.

These benefits however are often obtained at the expense of good teaching. We seem to forget that testing should serve teaching, and not the other way round. As Maley (2009) puts it, while testing plays an important role in teaching, 'we need to ensure that the testing tail does not wag the learning dog' (p. 5).

9.1 Learning-friendly assessments

These learning-friendly assessments are often called alternative or authentic assessments. They can be used 'to complement or replace traditional instruments that use multiple choice, true-false and fill-in-the-blank items that focus on accuracy, grammar, and lower-order thinking (Jacobs and Farrell, 2003, p. 19). Features of authentic assessments include the following:

- they reflect closely what we teach and how we teach in class both in terms of contents and also assessment formats
- they provide information about areas of students' weaknesses AND their strengths. This is unlike traditional assessments that tend to give undue emphasis on what students CANNOT do more than what they CAN do.
- the goal of these assessments is to test AND to teach, thus blurring the distinction between assessing and teaching. We teach when we assess; we assess when we teach as well.
- they mirror more closely how language is used in real life, thus is more motivating. Students can see the real value of these assessment procedures and are likely to work hard to perform well

Alternative assessment procedures such as portfolios and project work can be more motivating and provide useful information about student learning. They also take examination fear and anxiety away, help students become intrinsically motivated as they learn how to develop their language skills in a low-anxiety classroom environment.

10. Conclusion

Blaming students for their low motivation or giving them a daily 'lecture' about the importance of motivation to learn English is not going to have any significant effect of student motivation. But improving the way we teach in the classroom can enhance student motivation. Hence, the key to increasing student motivation lies with the teacher: his/her nurturing and caring personality, his/her

skills in teaching and ability to fully and efficiently utilize available instructional resources (the teaching methods, the instructional materials, the learning tasks, and the test) are what keep students stimulated and engaged throughout the tenure of their studies. Yes, students do play a role (and an important role too), but it is the teacher who is largely responsible for igniting students' desire to learn in the language classroom.

"Teach in the right way," Otto Jespersen reminded us more than a century ago, "then there will be life and love in it all ..." (1904, p.9).

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Biodata



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