Using Films to Develop Learner Motivation

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This article is based on observations and experiments conducted within the Japanese tertiary sector. It takes a very broad look at some of the theory relating to language learning and motivation. It identifies a problem relating to motivation in the Japanese education system and goes on to present possible solutions to the problem. The article then illustrates the possible solutions with a practical example of how movies may be employed in the classroom in a manner which both facilitates language learning and further encourages motivation

Introduction

As a teacher operating within the 'motivational wasteland' (Berwick and Ross 1989:206) of the Japanese tertiary education system I have often felt a kinship with marathon runners hitting 'the wall'. In my case 'the wall' being a sea of drooping eyelids drifting towards the displays of none too carefully concealed mobile telephones. For anyone involved with language teaching there can be few more professionally demoralizing experiences than a class totally lacking in motivation; so much valuable time and energy spent on an, often fruitless, search for stimulating teaching materials. This article is a product of years of such time and energy; as such it aims to share with other teachers a possible avenue which may encourage learner motivation.

The Problem

Much has been written about motivation and language learning, and a lot of what has been written focuses on the distinction between instrumental and integrative motivation. Motivational factors in Japan are confused by the country's position on the periphery of the English speaking world and the high, some might say unrealistic, educational demands of a developed economy at the core of the international business system. It is this contradictory position which leads to conflicting aims at the macro level of curriculum planning. As interesting as this may be, it is not our concern here; we are interested in how this contradiction leads to a motivation problem at the classroom level, and how we might tackle this problem. We are interested in the kind of bizarre, yet I suspect far from infrequent, situation which leads to students barely able to articulate their home telephone number grappling with complex texts concerning the morality of genetic engineering. Our interest is curriculum demands which fail to recognize the reality of communicative competence leading to, at best, frustration and, more often than not, antipathy.

What Is the Teacher to Do?

Faced with this situation, what is a teacher to do? I would suggest that a teacher has three options.

- One option is what we might term total surrender; this entails acknowledging that better people than yourself have been there and failed, conceding that the level at which change needs to be made is beyond your reach, and putting your own physical and mental well-being first concluding that the fight just is not worth it.
- The second option could be termed an honorable retreat; this would involve a thorough resetting of the teacher's goals, with the aim of the class shifting from language learning to a kind of mental aerobics session whereby all parties aim to keep themselves busy and pass the allotted time as painlessly as possible.
- The third option, and this is the one which we shall pursue in greater detail, is the Peace Treaty. This 'peace' involves negotiations between teachers and learners which aim to re-focus the scope of the class, which attempt to align tasks compatible with the level of the group and the needs of the curriculum.

A good illustration of our problem can be found in the use of film in the classroom. Students will often express an interest in using movies as a medium for language learning, then proceed to sleep through any movie shown. Such a case presents a nice little cameo of our wider problem; the original intent is both worthy and genuine, but when limited linguistic competence is faced with a dense

input of L2 material, boredom is often the result. The challenge for the teacher becomes; how to harness the original good intentions with tasks that are possible, tasks that set a clear goal and leave learners with a sense of achievement upon their completion.

Classroom Applications

To illustrate possible classroom applications of our approach it might be appropriate to present a typical example.

Group Profile

- Learners: College Students (ages 19/20)
- Number: 30
- Motivation: Varied but generally low
- L2 Competence: Beginner/Elementary
- Background Information: Learners reluctant to volunteer opinions or interrupt, adhering to strict patterns of turn-taking tend to focus on form rather than meaning; aim for accuracy above communication
- Raw Materials: Movie

In this case the group has expressed an interest in watching movies in English. The teacher's task is to manipulate this enthusiasm in a way that develops a positive attitude towards language learning. The challenge is obvious; if learners can tackle tasks related to a full-length movie then their confidence and self-esteem will be boosted, on the other hand the teacher is aware that a full-length movie is way beyond this group of learners, and there is a danger that showing it may prove counter-productive. In such a case the key lies in the successful exploitation of raw materials, in the construction of challenging yet achievable learning tasks.

- Step 1
  A movie is chosen which both represents the wishes of the learners and conforms to institutional constraints such as content, timing and availability.
- Step 2
  The whole movie is shown in its subtitled version. The reasoning behind this is that to show the whole movie without subtitles is likely to prove de-motivating; the language content being far too difficult for the group. Such a showing should also create the welcome by-product of a pleasant environment conducive to learning. The teacher is also storing 'good will' credit with the group. Such a showing obviously has few direct pedagogical merits, but it is hoped that the short term sacrifice will be amply rewarded in the long run.
- Step 3
  The movie is shown without subtitles. Before this viewing the students are divided into small groups of three and given the task of noting any short scenes involving three protagonists.
- Step 4
  The students then choose one of their noted scenes as the basis for a role play/ listening activity. The students are given the task of finding their scene and the opportunity to view the scene as many times as they wish. The aim of this repeated viewing is for them to script a version of the scene. At this point it needs to be made clear to students that the aim is not to produce a verbatim transcript of the scene but something which approximates to the context and the action on the screen.
- Step 5
  Students then make an audio recording of their version of the scene, each taking the role of one of the protagonists.
- Step 6
  The students' version of the scene is then played back with the video accompaniment minus sound. (If technically possible, the students' version can be directly dubbed on to the video tape.) By doing this students will hear their own voices 'in synch' with a movie they have enjoyed.

Obviously such a project requires a massive investment of time. Does the return merit such an investment? At a basic level the students should enjoy such an activity making them more positively disposed towards language learning, if not immediately then perhaps at some time in the future. Anything which helps to remove negative attitudes to language learning should not be undervalued. The activity gives learners a clear goal, and a goal that is achievable; there are no right or wrong answers, as long as the script fits the scene. Learners are encouraged to use the linguistic tools they have available to solve an immediate problem. The activity also practices both extensive and intensive listening skills, in addition it allows student to use the non-verbal clues which make video such a rich medium for language learning.

Summary

We started by painting a very bleak picture of the monolingual teaching environment, perhaps the case was overstated a little. Nevertheless there can exist a clear motivation problem. The signals can be confusing for learners; constant news of internationalization and the global economy point to English language skills being essential, yet daily social interaction, often backed by strong historical and cultural factors indicate otherwise. This is a contradiction which can run throughout the system, from the highest planning levels through to the classroom . Our challenge as teachers is to somehow bridge that contradiction by developing materials and tasks which take into account both the high expectations and the low motivation. Our challenge is to foster and develop motivation by providing clear goals and achievable tasks using raw materials which might otherwise be beyond the linguistic capacity of our learners.

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