

Motivation and Motivating in the Foreign Language Classroom

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Introduction

In this paper, we will briefly examine a variety of techniques, strategies and macrostrategies which teachers can employ in order to motivate their students. As Dornyei (2001: 116) notes, 'teacher skills in *motivating* learners should be seen as central to teaching effectiveness'. Even though there have been a lot of education-oriented publications providing taxonomies of classroom-specific motives, they fall short of offering an efficient guide to practitioners. Thus, our main goal is to familiarise any putative "practitioners" with a set of techniques and strategies (henceforward, "motivational strategies") for motivating foreign language students.

Power in the Classroom

Prior to presenting some of these motivational strategies, it would be of relevance to say a few things about the teacher / learner relationship. Whichever way we look at it, this relationship is riddled with power and status. For many, power plays a large part in the relationship (see "Language and Power in Education" for further details). The rights and duties of teachers and learners are related to power. For example, many teachers might assert that they have the right to punish those learners who misbehave. In any social encounter involving two or more people, there are certain power relationships 'which are almost always asymmetrical' (Wright, 1987: 17). Social psychologists distinguish between three different types of power—*coercive*, *reward-based*, and *referent* (ibid.). The basis of coercive power is punishment. Some individuals or institutions have the authority to punish others. The basis of the second type of power is reward. Some individuals or institutions have the power to reward what they deem appropriate behaviour. For example, business organisations reward employees with a salary, a bonus etc. The basis of the third type of power is motivation. In this case, individuals or institutions appeal to the commitment and interest of others. In view of this three-fold paradigm, it is of importance to concern ourselves with the fostering of learner motivation, as it is considered to be the most effective and proactive, so to speak, power relationship.

Group Processes and Motivation

A discussion of motivation and motivational strategies would not be complete without a consideration of group processes, inasmuch as there is usually a group of people that we as teachers are called on to motivate. Tuckman (1969, quoted in Argyle, 1969) established that a group went through four stages from its formation, which has important implications for the study of the classroom and the use of group activities during teaching.

- Stage 1 **Forming** : At first, there is some anxiety among the members of the group, as they are dependent on the leader (that is, the teacher) and they have to find out what behaviour is acceptable.
- Stage 2 **Storming** : There is conflict between sub-groups and rebellion against the leader. Members of the group resist their leader and the role relations attending the function of the group are questioned.
- Stage 3 **Norming** : The group begins to develop a sort of cohesion. Members of the group begin to support each other. At this stage, there is co-operation and open exchange of views and feelings about their roles and each other.
- Stage 4 **Performing** : Most problems are resolved and there is a great deal of interpersonal activity. Everyone is devoted to completing the tasks they have been assigned.

Experience shows that almost every group goes through these four (or even more) stages until it reaches equilibrium and, thus, taps into its potential. In reality, this process may go on forever, since student lethargy and underachievement norms in the classroom are considered to be basic hindrances to effective teaching and learning (Daniels, 1994). Against this background, we will try to design a framework for motivational strategies.

A Framework for Motivational Strategies

As we have already said, skill in motivating students to learn is of paramount importance. Until recently, however, teachers were forced to rely on “bag-of-tricks” approaches in their attempt to manage their classroom and motivate their learners. Good and Brophy (1994: 212) hold that these approaches have been influenced by two contradictory views:

- a) that learning should be fun and that any motivation problems that may appear should be ascribed to the teacher's attempt to convert an enjoyable activity to drudgery; and
- b) that school activities are inherently boring and unrewarding, so that we must rely on extrinsic rewards and punishment with a view to forcing students to engage in these unpleasant tasks.

Rewards and punishments may be a mainstay of the teaching-learning process, but they are not the only tools in teachers' arsenal. Dornyei (2001: 119) believes that ‘the spectrum of other potentially more effective motivational strategies is so broad that it is hard to imagine that none of them would work’.

The central question in designing a framework of motivational strategies is to decide how to organise them into separate themes. The following taxonomy, around which our main discussion will revolve, is based on the process-oriented model by Dornyei and Otto (1998). The key units in this taxonomy are as follows:

- *Creating the basic motivational conditions*, which involves setting the scene for the use of motivational strategies;
- *Generating student motivation*, which roughly corresponds to the preactional phase in the model;
- *Maintaining and protecting motivation*, which corresponds to the actional phase;
- *Encouraging positive self-evaluation*, which corresponds to the postactional phase

Creating the Basic Motivational Conditions

Motivational strategies cannot work in a vacuum. There are certain preconditions to be met before any attempts to generate motivation can be effective. Some of these conditions are the following:

- a) appropriate teacher behaviour and good teacher-student rapport;
- b) a pleasant and supportive classroom atmosphere;
- c) a cohesive learner group characterised by appropriate group norms

Appropriate Teacher Behaviour and Good Teacher-student Rapport

Whatever is done by a teacher has a motivational, formative, influence on students. In other words, teacher behaviour is a powerful ‘motivational tool’ (Dornyei, 2001: 120). Teacher influences are manifold, ranging from the rapport with the students to teacher behaviours which “prevail upon” and / or “attract” students to engage in tasks. For Alison (1993), a key element is to establish a relationship of mutual trust and respect with the learners, by means of talking with them on a personal level. This mutual trust could lead to enthusiasm. At any rate, enthusiastic teachers impart a sense of commitment to, and interest in, the subject matter, not only verbally but also non-verbally—cues that students take from them about how to behave.

A Pleasant and Supportive Classroom Atmosphere

It stands to reason that a tense classroom climate can undermine learning and demotivate learners (see MacIntyre, 1999 and Young, 1999 for further details). On the other hand, learner motivation will reach its peak in a safe classroom climate in which students can express their opinions and feel that they do not run the risk of being ridiculed.

To be motivated to learn, students need both ample opportunities to learn and steady encouragement and support of their learning efforts. Because such motivation is unlikely to develop in a chaotic classroom, it is important that the teacher organise and manage the classroom as an effective learning environment. Furthermore, because anxious or alienated students are unlikely to develop motivation to learn, it is important that learning occurs within a relaxed and supportive atmosphere (Good and Brophy, 1994: 215).

A Cohesive Learner Group Characterised by Appropriate Group Norms

As was hinted at above, fragmented groups, characterised by lack of cooperativeness, can easily become ineffective, thus reducing the individual members' commitment to learn. There are several factors that promote group cohesiveness, such as the time spent together and shared group history, learning about each other, interaction, intergroup competition, common threat, active presence of the leader [...] (see Ehrman and Dornyei, 1998: 142).

As for group norms, they should be discussed and adopted by members, in order to be constructive and long-lasting. If a norm mandated by a teacher fails to be accepted as proper by the majority of the class members, it will not become a group norm.

Generating Student Motivation

Ideally, all learners exhibit an inborn curiosity to explore the world, so they are likely to find the learning experience *per se* intrinsically pleasant. In reality, however, this "curiosity" is weakened by such inexorable factors as compulsory school attendance, curriculum content, and grades—most importantly, the premium placed on them.

Apparently, unless teachers increase their learners' 'goal-orientedness', make curriculum relevant for them, and create realistic learner beliefs, they will come up against a classroom environment fraught with lack of cohesiveness and rebellion.

Increasing the Learners' 'Goal-Orientedness'

In some classes, many, if not most, students do not understand why they are involved in an activity. It may be the case that the goal set by outsiders (i.e., the teacher or the curriculum) is far from being accepted by the group members. Thus, it would seem beneficial to increase the group's goal-orientedness, that is, the extent to which the group tunes in to the pursuit of its official goal. This could be achieved by allowing students to define their own personal criteria for what should be a group goal.

Making the Curriculum Relevant for the Learners

Many students do their homework and engage in many types of learning activities, even when a subject is not very interesting. Obviously, these students share the belief of the curriculum makers that what they are being taught will come in handy. In order to inspire learners to concern themselves with most learning activities, we should find out their goals and the topics they want to learn, and try to incorporate them into the curriculum. According to Chambers (1999: 37), '[i]f the teacher is to motivate pupils to learn, then relevance has to be the red thread permeating activities'.

Creating Realistic Learner Beliefs

It is widely acknowledged that learner beliefs about how much progress to expect, and at what pace, can, and do, lead to disappointment. Therefore, it is important to help learners get rid of their preconceived notions that are likely to hinder their attainment. To this end, learners need to develop an understanding of the nature of second language learning, and should be cognisant of the fact that the mastery of L2 can be achieved in different ways, using a diversity of strategies, and a key factor is for learners to discover for themselves the optimal methods and techniques.

Maintaining and Protecting Motivation

Unless motivation is sustained and protected when action has commenced, the natural tendency to get tired or bored of the task and succumb to any attractive distractions will result in demotivation. Therefore, there should be a motivational repertoire including several motivation maintenance strategies. Let us have a look at two of them: a) increasing the learners' self-confidence; and b) creating learner autonomy.

Increasing the Learners' Self-confidence

In an inherently face-threatening context, as the language classroom is likely to be, it is important to find out how to maintain and

increase the learners' self-confidence. There are five approaches that purport to help to this end (Dornyei, 2001: 130):

- Teachers can foster the belief that competence is a changeable aspect of development
- Favourable self-conceptions of L2 competence can be promoted by providing regular experiences of success
- Everyone is more interested in a task if they feel that they make a contribution
- A small personal word of encouragement is sufficient
- Teachers can reduce classroom anxiety by making the learning context less stressful

Creating Learner Autonomy

Many educationists and researchers (Benson, 2000; Little, 1991; Wenden, 1991; also see my article, “What is Learner Autonomy and How can it be Fostered?”) argue that taking charge of one's learning, that is, becoming an autonomous learner, can prove beneficial to learning. This assumption is premised on humanistic psychology, namely that ‘the only kind of learning which significantly affects behaviour is self-discovered, self-appropriated learning’ (Rogers, 1961: 276). Benson (2000, found in Dornyei, 2001: 131) distinguishes between five types of practice fostering the development of autonomy:

- *resource-based approaches*, which emphasise independent interaction with learning materials
- *technology-based approaches*, which emphasise independent interaction with educational technologies
- *learner-based approaches*, which emphasise the direct production of behavioural and psychological changes in the learner
- *classroom-based approaches*, which emphasise changes in the relationship between learners and teachers in the classroom
- *curriculum-based approaches*, which extend the idea of learner control over the planning and evaluation of learning to the curriculum as a whole

Good and Brophy (1994: 228) note that ‘the simplest way to ensure that people value what they are doing is to maximise their free choice and autonomy’—a sentiment shared by Ushioda (1997: 41), who remarks that ‘[s]elf-motivation is a question of thinking effectively and meaningfully about learning experience and learning goals. It is a question of applying positive thought patterns and belief structures so as to optimise and sustain one's involvement in learning’.

Encouraging Positive Self-evaluation

Research has shown that the way learners feel about their accomplishments and the amount of satisfaction they experience after task completion will determine how teachers approach and tackle subsequent learning tasks. By employing appropriate strategies, the latter can help learners to evaluate themselves in a positive light, encouraging them to take credit for their advances. Dornyei (2001: 134) presents three areas of such strategies:

- Promoting attributions to effort rather than to ability
- Providing motivational feedback
- Increasing learner satisfaction and the question of rewards and grades.

We will only briefly discuss the third one.

Increasing Learner Satisfaction and the Question of Rewards and Grades

The feeling of satisfaction is a significant factor in reinforcing achievement behaviour, which renders satisfaction a major component of motivation. Motivational strategies aimed at increasing learner satisfaction usually focus on allowing students to display their work, encouraging them to be proud of themselves and celebrate success, as well as using rewards. The latter, though, do not work properly within a system where grades are ‘the ultimate embodiment of school rewards, providing a single index for judging overall success and failure in school’ (ibid.). In other words, grades focus on performance outcomes, rather than on the process of learning itself. Consequently, ‘many students are grade driven, not to say, “grade grubbing,” and this preoccupation begins surprisingly early in life’ (Covington, 1999: 127).

There is also a wide assortment of macrostrategies used to foster motivation, but we will not dwell on them (see Dornyei, 2001: 137-140 for more details).

Conclusion

In general, motivation is the 'neglected heart' of our understanding of how to design instruction (Keller, 1983, quoted in Dornyei, 2001: 116). Many teachers believe that by sticking to the language materials and trying to discipline their refractory students, they will manage to create a classroom environment that will be conducive to learning. Nevertheless, these teachers seem to lose sight of the fact that, unless they accept their students' personalities and work on those minute details that constitute their social and psychological make-up, they will fail to motivate them. What is more, they will not be able to form a cohesive and coherent group, unless they succeed in turning most "curriculum goals" (goals set by outsiders) into "group goals" (goals accepted by the group members, that is, students). Learning a foreign language is different to learning other subjects. Therefore, language teaching should take account of a variety of factors that are likely to promote, or even militate against, success. Language is part of one's identity and is used to convey this identity to others. As a result, foreign language learning has a significant impact on the social being of the learner, since it involves the adoption of new social and cultural behaviours and ways of thinking.

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