

# Motivation in the ESL Classroom

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## Introduction

Motivation is the key to all learning. Lack of motivation is perhaps the biggest obstacle faced by teachers, counselors, school administrators, and parents. Behavioral problems in the classroom often, or always, seem to be linked to the lack of motivation. Ruth Peters states that, "academic achievement is more a product of appropriate placement of priorities and responsible behavior than it is of intelligence." (Peters) Intelligent students are often out-performed by less bright students with high motivation. If a child is motivated enough he/she can accomplish learning of any scale.

## Intrinsic Motivation

The main idea of motivation is to capture the child's attention and curiosity and channel their energy towards learning. Intrinsic motivation is motivation from within the student (Lumsden). An intrinsically motivated student studies because he/she wants to study. The material is interesting, challenging and rewarding, and the student receives some kind of satisfaction from learning. I have one such student. She is a senior at my high school. She never misses a homework, is always using her dictionary when a word comes up she doesn't know, and as a result of these kinds of habits she always does well on her tests. One time I just checked to see if the students had their homework done or not, and after class she asked me if she had any mistakes on her homework or not. She prefers tasks that are moderately challenging. She demands more effort from herself and has a need for deep understanding. To have an intrinsically motivated student is the goal of all motivational development.

## Extrinsic Motivation

An extrinsically motivated student studies and learns for other reasons. Such a student performs in order to receive a reward, like graduating or passing a test or getting a new shirt from mom, or to avoid a penalty like a failing grade (Lumsden). Here is a description of one of my extrinsically motivated students. She is a very good student, and actually shows signs of being intrinsically motivated, but in general she is inclined to put forth the minimal effort necessary to get the maximal reward. When I give an assignment in class, she often tries to chat with her friends or fails to get started, but if I say this will be taken up and graded, she is often the first one finished. Her intrinsic motivation shows when the material is of great interest to her, or something she feels strongly about. Also, if I can get her curious about something, without her being distracted, she works hard at it. She performs well, as with many of my students who are extrinsically motivated, if I give her a task where she has control, the task is very clear, and she is involved in the dynamics of the class. It seems that when intrinsic motivation is low or absent, extrinsic motivation must be used. Although extrinsic motivation can, and should, be used with intrinsically motivated students, too. If students aren't given a reward or credit for their efforts, and no feedback is given to the student, then most students' intrinsic motivation would begin to decrease.

## Becoming Intrinsically Motivated

There are many ways teachers can help their students become intrinsically motivated. Krashen writes

of a mild level of anxiety, or "low affective filter" in the classroom and in the whole learning environment (Cerny). The attitude the student has towards the learning environment, the teacher, the material, and towards him/herself all affect this level of anxiety (Bantjes). A student will find it difficult to perform in a stressful environment.

## Proper Instruction

Proper classroom explanation is needed by the teacher, so the students can well understand what is expected of them (Harris). In the ESL classroom this is more apt to create anxiety because the explanations are given in another language that takes even more effort by the students to comprehend than their own language. A well-planned lesson is essential. The teacher must be creative and flexible. Depending on the nature of the class and the students' levels, the dynamics of the class must be appropriate. I teach a first year high school class of 12 boys who are very energetic. I can generally teach at the i+1 level, a little above what they already know. But sometimes when they don't understand, I have to change gears and think of another way as to not lose the energy of the class. I also teach a class of 12 second year boys who are not energetic at all. The lessons must be very simple, yet fun and interesting, with a lot of changes from a writing exercise, to a speaking, a listening, back to writing, and so on, all in the same class. The students' span of attention and levels are lower, so if something is a bit challenging they don't have what it takes to do it. Unlike the first year boys who enjoy challenging materials and will try harder to understand some things on their own. The type of student I am trying to mold is one who, when faced with something he doesn't understand, will say "Hmm, I think I know what he means, I'll give it a try", instead of "I didn't understand, I can't possibly start this on my own."

## Achievable, Relevant Material

The material must also be relevant to the students. Try to use vocabulary that the students can relate to and material they would find interesting. With my first year class this is rather difficult because it is an entry-level English class, but I try to introduce relevant material. Another very important part of proper classroom instruction to keep a low affective filter is to keep it simple and structural. I have one student in the second year class who needs constant individual instruction. It's not that he lacks the energy, but simply understands less than the other students. With him I have to keep lesson points simple, slow, and repetitive, usually after the other students have started on the exercise. When he feels the task at hand is achievable, he works diligently towards finishing. When I am introducing a lesson, sometimes I focus on him and keep trying until he understands, then I know the whole class will, too. Through this slow effort I keep his level of anxiety low, and hopes for internal motivation up.

## Caring Teacher

Another important aspect of improving the intrinsic motivation of your students is to be a caring teacher. Although guidelines and rules must be set and understood by the students, and if they cross the guidelines a punishment will follow, the teacher must be approachable and understanding (Harris). Students must feel the teacher is genuine and supportive, and the students' values and opinions will be respected (Lumsden).

Teachers must be kind and listen fairly to the students, and be patient when they don't understand. I have seen other teachers who run their classes very strictly, almost as a sort of dictator' in class. The teacher gets upset at the students who don't try, when it appears the reason is that they don't understand what is asked of them.

A caring teacher tries to develop a relationship with the students. If the teacher sees potential in all students, and communicates this well to the students, they will in return build a desire to learn and participate. When the students realize that you are not going to get angry, you are being nice and understanding, and the reason you are trying so hard is because it is important to you that your students learn and do well, the natural human reaction is to reciprocate and do something nice in return, in this case, study.

I have had one student that fits this description exactly. She is considered by most teachers to be a problem student. She has many times considered quitting school. Her parents don't seem to care if she quits school. In my class, at first, I tried to get angry with her, and threatened to contact her parents because she was not participating in class. She wanted to sleep in class and would never even pick up her pencil some days. When I would get angry with her, she closed up even more, to the extent of purposely going to the nurse when she was supposed to be in my class, and even stormed out of my class once in anger and went to the nurse. Now, one's initial thought would be that she deserves punishment for such behavior, but she doesn't react to punishment, and her parents aren't very good at punishing her. It would make her happy to be expelled from school. What works best with her is a caring teacher. I explained to her after class one day that there was no need to get angry at me because I am doing this because I think she has the ability and I want her to do well. I told her I don't like to get angry, and that there is a genuine importance to her being in my class, participating, and learning. She is in a class with many high level students, so it difficult to keep her anxiety low. I have to try to convince her that she belongs in that class the same as everyone else. I do this often by pairing her up with another student who needs her answers to complete an exercise. This type of motivation would be considered extrinsic motivation, but any motivation is better than none.

## Energy Sells

A teacher's positive energy could lead to the students becoming more motivated. If the students see that the teacher is happy to be in the classroom and excited to teach them, then the students can learn by example. A smile is contagious. Positive attitude is a must for a successful learning atmosphere. To promote self-confidence, it helps if the teacher is self-confident. Positive approval and praise for student efforts is very effective, even if the student is wrong. Let the students know that you're glad they tried and being wrong isn't such a big problem, and the students won't be so reluctant the next time they're called on to participate. Positive energy affirming a belief in the students' ability develops a comfortable atmosphere for the students in the classroom

## Parental Awareness

Increased parental awareness is also crucial to a child's motivation (Bantjes). To support motivation, parents must participate actively in the student's life. The same set of goals and practices at school that promote motivation should be followed at home. If they are not also followed at home, it could dilute classroom efforts. Through appropriate parent/teacher/student communication, everyone can understand what is expected from each other, and the student will see that everyone involved cares about his/her academic success.

## Conclusion

Motivation is the backbone of any classroom. When the students are motivated, the teacher can perform his/her job the best. A teacher can do a lot to improve the students' motivation, and the effort involved is an essential part of the teaching profession.

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