

Kwansei Gakuin University
Humanities Review
Vol. 21, 2016
Nishinomiya, Japan

Keeping It Fresh: The Importance of Novelty in the Classroom

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Abstract

This paper briefly outlines the issues of motivation and engagement that face EFL learners not only in Japan, but the world over. It offers definitions of motivation and engagement, and outlines the problems that teachers face when students become demotivated and disengaged with their learning. It proceeds to describe how research from Mind, Brain, and Education science can inform teachers about how to counteract this problem, in particular by taking advantage of the Reticular Activation System's sensitivity to novelty and the subsequent boost to attention, motivation, and engagement.

I. Introduction

This paper aims to address the issue of motivation and engagement in EFL learners from the perspective of Mind, Brain, and Education science. In Japan, motivation to learn English is commonly known to decrease as students progress through the levels of education (Yashima, 2002), and they often exhibit signs of being disengaged from their lessons. Novelty and the arousal of curiosity have been found to be efficacious in promoting motivation and engagement in learners and learning environments that have become stagnant, bored, and otherwise ineffective. This paper will describe the process by which novelty can aid student engagement and motivation, and offer some practical tips on how to achieve this.

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II. Motivation in SLA

As has been reported on countless times, motivation is one of the key factors that determine a learner's success in SLA (Gardner, 1985; Gardner et al., 2004; Lightbown & Spada, 1993). A lack of motivation inevitably leads to either failure to achieve competence in learning a second or foreign language, or stagnation at a certain level. Dornyei (1998) terms motivation as that which "is responsible for determining human behaviour by energising it and giving it direction" (p.117). He further posits that motivation in second and foreign language learning is by no means a simple thing, rather a multifaceted phenomenon including such factors as a learner's expectancy of success, the value they place on the learning of the target language, and what goals they have and how the target language orients towards those goals (Dornyei, *ibid.*). Additionally, Williams and Burden (1997) explain that there are both internal and external factors that affect motivation in language learning. Internal factors relate to those factors which come from *inside* the learner, i.e. the learner's feelings, attitudes, emotional state, developmental age and gender, whereas external factors relate to outside pressure from parents, teachers, and peers, the learning environment, and cultural and societal pressures (for details see Table 1 below).

Table 1 Williams and Burden's (1997) framework of motivation in language learning

<i>Internal factors</i>	<i>External factors</i>
Intrinsic interest of activity <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Arousal of curiosity • Optimal degree of challenge 	Significant others <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parents • Teachers • Peers
Perceived value of activity <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Personal relevance • Anticipated value of outcomes • Intrinsic value attributed to the activity 	The nature of interactions with significant others <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mediated learning experiences • The nature and amount of feedback • Rewards • The nature and amount of appropriate praise • Punishments and sanctions
Sense of agency <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Locus of causality • Locus of control RE process and outcomes • Ability to set appropriate goals 	The learning environment <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Comfort • Resources • Time of day, week, year • Size of class and school • Class and school ethos

<p>Mastery</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Feelings of competence • Awareness of developing skills and mastery in a chosen area • Self-efficacy 	<p>The broader context</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Wider family networks • The local education system • Conflicting interests • Cultural norms • Societal expectations and attitudes
<p>Self-concept</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Realistic awareness of personal • Strengths and weaknesses in skills required • Personal definitions and judgements of success and failure • Self-worth concern learned helplessness 	
<p>Attitudes towards language learning in general</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To the target language • To the target language community and culture 	
<p>Other affective states</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Confidence • Anxiety and fear 	
<p>Developmental age and stage</p>	
<p>Gender</p>	

Regarding the Japanese EFL context, Japanese students are widely known to lack sufficient motivation, particularly among those studying in STEM fields (Hill, Falout & Apple, 2012; Kaneko, 2012). For these students in particular, English as a foreign language is often not seen as particularly relevant or interesting. After all, if they had wanted to study English, why wouldn't they have entered the languages faculty?

III. Engagement

Another factor that is inherently connected to motivation and language learning is student engagement. How much attention students pay to tasks and activities during class, their participation, interaction with the teacher and their peers, and volunteering answers are all ingredients of successful student engagement (Huang, 2011). Klem and Connell (2004) state that learners who are engaged will invest effort in their work, enjoy challenges, and persevere through difficult tasks. One common obstacle to learner engagement is a lack or loss of interest in the task or activity at hand, leading to learners becoming bored or distracted (Carless, 2007). Stroud (2014) outlines the importance of learners being behaviorally engaged (doing the work assigned to them) as well as emotionally engaged (experiencing positive emotions or pleasure from the work). Unfortunately, in the Japanese EFL context, student engagement in language classrooms is often sorely lacking, and students often

tend to zone out and lose focus on classroom activities and tasks, and not display signs of interest or enjoyment in their work.

IV. Utilizing brain-based research to foster motivation and engagement

As a way to combat this loss of motivation and engagement in English classes, we recommend turning to research emerging from Mind, Brain, and Education science. This field of study takes research from the separate fields of psychology, neuroscience and education, and analyses how they can inform each other to find out how people learn best. One of the key elements that has been identified as impactful on motivation and engagement is curiosity. Curiosity stems from novelty, something new that is unexpected and raises consciousness.

Willis (2010) emphasises the importance of novelty in the classroom by first describing the Reticular Activating System (RAS), the first gateway to the brain of all sensory information. The RAS involuntarily chooses only several thousand of the millions of pieces of information available to our brains every second to pass through and be processed by other parts of the brain. When aroused, the RAS increases blood flow to the brain, and because of this, alertness, attention, and engagement increase (Steriade, 1996). First and foremost, the RAS is sensitive to critical information for our survival, and sends that information to the lower part of the brain which is responsible for the fight, flight, or freeze response (Raz & Buhle, 2006). The implications for this in a classroom setting is that should a student encounter a situation in which he or she feels stress, anger, or fear, he or she is more likely to focus on that threat and lose focus on the task and content at hand (Shim, 2005). However, the RAS is also extremely sensitive to novelty, pleasure, and things that arouse curiosity (Willis, *ibid*). In a classroom, this means that whenever a student encounters something novel, the RAS is alerted to pay more attention because of a change that justifies further evaluation (Wang et al., 2005).

By understanding more about how the brain works and how to capture the attention of their students, teachers can better design their classes to take advantage of their students' brains' sensitivity to novelty and change, arouse their curiosity, and facilitate more engagement with tasks, activities, and lesson content. Ames (1992) identifies novelty, variety, diversity, interest, and reasonable challenges as being important in students' mastery goal orientation. Willis (*ibid.*) outlines an abundance of techniques for how to incorporate novelty and variety into educational settings, thus creating interest and encouraging engagement in students. The following (Table 2) are examples from that list, as well as others we recommend as well.

Table 2 Ideas for incorporating novelty into educational settings

- Change your voice intonation, speed, and volume when presenting information.
- Use colours to mark key points on charts, documents, boards, and slides.
- Vary the font styles and sizes in text.
- Change seating arrangements from time to time.
- Advertise future units or lessons with posters, puzzles, clues, and hints. Ask students to predict what they think it's referring to.
- Play music when students enter the room, when you enter the room, or to signal the presentation of new or important information.
- Behave in a novel manner, such as teaching from a new part of the classroom.
- Incorporate humour whenever possible. This creates pleasure in the brain and focuses students' attention (Sousa, 2006; Dornyei & Czicer, 1998).
- Where possible, offer hands-on activities that encourage students to use their hands for something other than writing or fidgeting.
- Offer students choices. Usually students are told what to do, so giving them a choice of options can be unexpected and novel. The act of choosing, even from a limited number of options, has the added advantage of creating personal relevance for students.
- Vary the activities of the lesson, both intra-lesson and from day to day or week to week (Dornyei & Czicer, 1998).
- Change the venue of the lesson. If the lesson content allows it, take the students outside or to a different room.
- Change your wardrobe. Wear something unexpected that stands out and grabs students' attention.
- Utilize technology in the classroom. This provides a change from the usual paper/pen and whiteboard/marker setup that most students are used to.

V. Conclusion

While many teachers may become frustrated with their students' seeming lack of motivation and engagement with their English language learning, there are ways to overcome this issue. Implementing some of the above examples, or coming up with one's own ideas to incorporate novelty into classes can take advantage of the RAS in students' brains and focus their attention and effort on classroom activities and learning, rather than becoming bored, disinterested, distracted, and disengaged.

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