



# The Role of Motivation in ESL/EFL Learning

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According to Harmer (2007a), it is accepted for most fields of learning that motivation is essential to success: we have to want to do something to succeed in it. Harmer (2007b) also states that a variety of factors can create a desire to learn. In this paper, we will examine what kind of role motivation plays in ESL/EFL learning.

**Key Words** : language learning, extrinsic motivation, intrinsic motivation, instrumental motivation, integrative motivation, motivational theories for language learning, teachers' roles

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## 1. Introduction

According to Harmer (2007a), it is accepted for most fields of learning that motivation is essential to success: that we have to want to do something to succeed in it. Without such motivation we will almost certainly fail to make the necessary effort. We need, therefore, to develop our understanding of motivation — what it means, where it comes from and how it can be sustained.

Harmer (2007b) states that a variety of factors can create a desire to learn. Perhaps the learners love the subject they have chosen, or maybe they are simply interested in seeing what it is like. Perhaps, as with young children, they just happen to be curious about everything, including learning. Some students have a practical reason for their study: they want to learn an instrument so they can play in an orchestra, learn English so they can watch American TV or understand manuals written in English, study T'ai Chi so that they can become fitter and more relaxed, or go to cookery classes so that they can prepare better meals. This desire to achieve some goal is the bedrock of motivation and, if it is strong enough, it provokes a decision to act.

In this paper, we will examine what kind of role motivation plays in ESL/EFL learning.

## 2. Defining Motivation

### 2.1 The General Definition

According to Harmer (2007b), at its most basic level, motivation is some kind of internal drive which pushes someone to do things in order to achieve something. In his discussion of motivation, Brown (2007) includes the need for ego enhancement as a prime motivator. This is the need for the self to be known and to be approved of by others. He (2007) says that this, presumably, is what causes people to spend hours in the gymnasium. Such a view of motivation also accounts for our need for exploration (i.e., the other side of the mountain). Williams and Burden (1997) suggest that motivation is a state of cognitive arousal which provokes a decision to act, as a result of which there is sustained intellectual and/or physical effort so that the person can achieve some previously set goal. They (1997) go on to point out that the strength of that motivation will depend on how much value the individual places on the outcome he or she wishes to achieve. Adults may have clearly defined or vague goals. Children's goals, on the other hand, are often more amorphous and less easy to describe, but they can still be very powerful.

To sum up, motivation is the strong drive to encourage people to do something in order to accomplish some goal.

## **2.2 The Categories of Motivation**

### **2.2.1 Extrinsic and Intrinsic Motivation**

According to Harmer (2007a), in discussions of motivation, an accepted distinction is made between extrinsic and intrinsic motivation, that is motivation which comes from outside and from inside. Extrinsic motivation is the result of any number of outside factors, for example the need to pass an examination, the hope of financial reward or the possibility of future travel. Intrinsic motivation, by contrast, comes from within the individual. Thus a person might be motivated by the enjoyment of the learning process itself or by a desire to make themselves feel better.

Deci (1975) states that intrinsically motivated actions are ones for which there is no apparent reward except the activity itself. People seem to engage in the activities for their own sake and not because they lead to an extrinsic reward. Intrinsically motivated behaviors are aimed at bringing about certain internally rewarding consequences, namely, feelings of competence and self-determination. On the other hand, Brown (2007) proposes that extrinsic motivation is fueled by the anticipation of a reward from outside and beyond the self. Typical extrinsic rewards are money, prizes, grades, and even certain types of positive feedback. Behaviors initiated solely to avoid punishment are also extrinsically motivated, even though numerous intrinsic benefits can ultimately accrue to those who, instead, view punishment avoidance as a challenge that can build their sense of competence and self-determination itself or by a desire to make themselves feel better.

Harmer (2007a) says that most researchers and methodologists have come to the view that intrinsic motivation produces better results than its extrinsic counterpart. Even where the original reason for taking up a language course, for example, is extrinsic, the chances of success will be greatly enhanced if the students come to love the learning process (i.e., intrinsic motivation).

### **2.2.2 Instrumental and Integrative Motivation**

Brown (2007) states that one of the best-known and historically significant studies of motivation in second/foreign language learning was carried out by Gardner and Lambert (1972). Over a period of 12 years, they extensively studied foreign language learners in Canada, several parts of the United States, and the Philippines in an effort to determine how

attitudinal and motivational factors affected language learning success. Motivation was examined as a factor of a number of different kinds of attitudes. Two different clusters of attitudes divided two basic types of what Gardner and Lambert (1972) identified as instrumental and integrative orientations to motivation. The instrumental side of the dichotomy referred to acquiring a language as a means for attaining instrumental goals: furthering a career, reading technical material, translation, and so forth. The integrative side described learners who wished to integrate themselves into the culture of the L2/FL group and become involved in social interchange in that group. Gardner and Lambert (1972) and Spolsky (1969) found that integrativeness generally accompanied higher scores on proficiency tests in an L2/FL. The conclusion from these studies was that integrativeness was indeed an important requirement for successful language learning. But evidence quickly began to accumulate that challenged such a claim. Lukmani (1972) demonstrated that among Marathi-speaking Indian students learning English in India, those with instrumental orientations scored higher in tests of English proficiency. Kachru (1992) noted that Indian English is but one example of a variety of Englishes, which, especially in countries where English has become an international language, can be acquired very successfully for instrumental purposes alone. In the face of claims and counterclaims about integrative and instrumental orientations, Au (1988) reviewed 27 different studies of the integrative-instrumental construct and concluded that both its theoretical underpinnings and the instruments used to measure motivation were suspect. Because the dichotomy was based on notions about cultural beliefs, numerous ambiguities had crept into the construct, making it difficult to attribute foreign language success to certain presumably integrative or instrumental causes. Gardner and MacIntyre (1993) disputed Au's claims with strong empirical support for the validity of their measures. To further muddy these waters, a number of subsequent investigations have produced ambiguous results. To sum up, at present, we can not determine which form of motivation is more effective for encouraging learners to take actions.

### 3. Theories of Motivation

According to Brown (2007), various theories of motivation have been proposed over the course of decades of research. Following the historical schools of thought described, three different perspectives emerge.

### 3.1 The Behavioral Perspective

From a behavioral perspective, motivation is seen in very matter of fact terms. It is quite simply the anticipation of reward. Driven to acquire positive reinforcement, and driven by previous experiences of reward for behavior, we act accordingly to achieve further reinforcement. Skinner, Pavlov, and Thorndike put motivation at the center of their theories of human behavior. In a behavioral view, performance in tasks—and motivation to do so—is likely to be at the mercy of external forces: parents, teachers, peers, educational requirements, job specifications, and so forth.

### 3.2 The Cognitive Perspective

In cognitive terms, motivation places much more emphasis on the individual's decisions. Keller (1983) states that the choices people make as to what experiences or goals they will approach or avoid, and the degree of effort they will exert in that respect. Some cognitive psychologists see underlying needs or drives as the compelling force behind our decisions. Ausubel (1968), for example, identified six needs undergirding the construct of motivation: 1) The need for exploration, for seeing the other side of the mountain, for probing the unknown; 2) The need for manipulation, for operating—to use Skinner's term—on the environment and causing change; 3) The need for activity, for movement and exercise, both physical and mental; 4) The need for stimulation, the need to be stimulated by the environment, by other people, or by ideas, thoughts, and feelings; 5) The need for knowledge, the need to process and internalize the results of exploration, manipulation, activity, and stimulation, to resolve contradictions, to quest for solutions to problems and for self-consistent systems of knowledge; 5) Finally, the need for ego enhancement, for the self to be known and to be accepted and approved of by others, or, what Dörnyei (2005) calls the self-system.

### 3.3 The Constructive Perspective

Williams & Burden (1997) states that a constructivist view of motivation places even further emphasis on social context as well as individual personal choices. Each person is motivated differently, and will therefore act on his or her environment in ways that are unique. But these unique acts are always carried out within a cultural and social milieu and cannot be completely separated from that context. Several decades ago, Maslow (1970) viewed motivation as a construct in which ultimate attainment of goals was possible only by passing through a hierarchy of needs, three of which were solidly grounded in community, belonging, and social status. Motivation, in a constructivist view, is derived as much from our

interactions with others as it is from one's self-determination.

### 3.4 The Summary of Three Theories

Brown (2007) suggests that the needs concept of motivation in some ways belongs to all three schools of thought which we have discussed in the sections 3.1, 3.2 and 3.3: that is, the fulfillment of needs is rewarding, requires choices, and in many cases must be interpreted in a social context. Consider children who are motivated to learn to read. They are motivated because they perceive the value (reward) of reading, they meet the needs of exploration, stimulation, knowledge, self-esteem, and autonomy, and they do so in widely varying ways and schedules and in the context of a society that values literacy. On the other hand, we may be unmotivated to learn a foreign language because we fail to see the rewards, connect the learning only to superficial needs (e.g., fulfilling a requirement), and see no possibility of a social context in which this skill is useful. Motivation is something that can, like self-esteem, be global, situational or task-oriented. Learning a foreign language requires some of all three levels of motivation. For example, a learner may possess high global motivation but low task motivation to perform well on, say, the written mode of the language.

So far, we have seen that three theories of motivation are related to learners' desire for studying the target language.

## 4. Motivation for Language Learning

### 4.1 Dörnyei's Motivational Theory for Language Learning

As for motivation for language learning, Dörnyei (2001) proposes the following three kinds of motivation. That is, according to Dörnyei (2001), the specific domain of L2/FL learning, we can distinguish between three main value dimensions: 1) The intrinsic value of the ongoing process of L2/FL learning, associated with the interest in and anticipated enjoyment of the language-learning activity. The key issue in generating interest is to whet the students' appetite — that is, to arouse the students' curiosity and attention, and to create an attractive image for the course; 2) Integrativeness involves a composite of various L2/FL-related attitudes (social, cultural, ethnolinguistic, etc.), as well as a general interest in foreignness and foreign languages. The importance of this value dimension suggests that the traditional practice of teaching languages through their cultures and the social reality of their speakers does have some scientific basis and, therefore, there is a need to make the L2/FL real by introducing to learners its cultural background, using authentic materials,

and promoting contact with native speakers of the L2/FL; 3) Instrumentality refers to the consequences that might arise from the mastery of the L2/FL. Its special importance in many L2/FL learning contexts lies in the fact that for most students the process of language learning is a means to achieve other goals through the knowledge of the L2/FL (rather than being an end in its own right). In order to spur students to invest more effort in the task than they might do otherwise, instrumental strategies can a) make students aware (or remind them) that successful completion of the tasks is instrumental to the accomplishment of their valued goal; b) reiterate the role the L2/FL plays in the world and its potential usefulness both for themselves and their community; c) establish incentive systems that offer extrinsic rewards for successful task completion (e.g., good grades, prizes, celebration).

According to Dörnyei (2001), motivated by these motivation, L2/FL learners are enhanced to study the target language.

#### **4.2 Davie and Pears' Motivational Theory for Language Learning**

According to Davie and Pears (2000), most teachers consider motivation essential for successful language learning. However, as we have discussed so far, motivation is difficult to define and measure. They (2000) wonder if all learners are motivated by worthwhile goals and clear objectives, the constant use of English in the classroom, a variety of activities and interactions, and sensitive handling of errors and hesitations. Their assumption has been that all learners are motivated by the above-mentioned factors. But they recognize that motivation is a complex phenomenon, and not all learners respond to teaching in the same way. Certain aspects of motivation may be beyond teachers' influence. Some learners come to a course needing English immediately for study or work (i.e., instrumentality), or wanting to learn it because they love Anglo-American culture (i.e., integrativeness). Others may be more reluctant, but know they are likely to need English in the future. Yet others are obliged to take a course, but have no desire to learn English, and a sincere hope they will never need to use it. With the first type of learner, the challenge for us (i.e., teachers) is to maintain and exploit the motivation learners bring to the course. With the last type, the challenge for us is to work hard at making the course itself enjoyable and satisfying. We also have to try to get reluctant learners to recognize that, for virtually anyone, English really could be useful at some time in their lives. Even for initially reluctant learners, appropriate goals and objectives can give direction and the will to work, in other words, improve motivation. And any success in real communication can motivate learners to study English (i.e., intrinsic value). But the ability to communicate effectively in English is such a huge, ill-defined goal, quite remote for



most elementary learners. Worthwhile and achievable short-term objectives can give the learners satisfaction and a sense of success as they work towards the main goal of their course. Even the most carefully planned activities will normally motivate learners only if they are related to their interests, needs, and aspirations (i.e., intrinsic value). We should try to find out what these factors (i.e., learners' interests, needs and aspiration) are and plan lessons accordingly. For example, teenage learners may want some work on communicating in English via the Internet, or activities using popular songs. It is a good idea to consult with our learners about topics and activities, and get them to bring to class materials they are interested in. Topics can be a rich source of motivation in the English language classroom. There are topics of personal interest, for example, music, films, cars, computers, the Internet, pets, and sports (i.e., the intrinsic value). If our learners are interested in Britain, the USA, or another English-speaking country, a coursebook with that country as the main theme can provide a good supply of topics (i.e., integrativeness). We may also be able to use authentic materials from those countries, for example, magazine and newspaper articles, cassettes of songs, and videos of television programs (i.e., integrativeness). Of course, as Crystal (2003) points out, English does not belong to any specific countries, societies, or cultures. These days, there are more non-native than native speakers of English and it is more often used between two non-native speakers than between a non-native and a native speaker. This cosmopolitan perspective appeals to many learners and is a rich source of topics for activities and lesson themes. Again, we may be able to use authentic materials, including any English-language newspapers published in our own country (e.g., *Asahi Weekly*, *Daily Yomiuri* and so on).

Davie and Pears (2000) also propose that teacher's personalities and relationships with learners are important for motivation. Our personality is bound to appeal to some learners more than others. We cannot totally change ourselves, but we can modify or develop some things. For example, we can use the learners' names and show a personal interest in them, and take care to behave in a fair way towards all learners alike. We can also educate ourselves in topics that interest our learners, for example, pop music and films for teenagers, new cars and technical developments for mechanics. Although, ideally, learners should be motivated by an awareness of their own progress, many will rely mostly on teachers' feedback. It can be very motivating for them if we, teachers, tell them clearly that we are pleased with their effort and progress (i.e., instrumentality). It may even be a wonderful surprise after frequent expressions of dissatisfaction from previous teachers.

It follows from what has been discussed that teachers play a vital role in enhancing

learners' motivation for studying English.

## 5. Implications for L2/FL Learning

In order for L2/FL learners to develop positive attitudes toward and motivation for studying the target language, Horwitz (2008) advances some suggestions: 1) Teachers should help students develop personal goals for language learning. For example, some students may not identify with the idea of going to college in the future, but want to participate in a school language activities; 2) Teachers should discuss students' ideas about the language and culture. English language learners are particularly vulnerable to developing stereotypes about Americans whenever they or someone they know has a negative interaction with English speakers; 3) Teachers should help students make connections with members of the community of the target language. Language buddies site on the Internet and e-mail exchanges are good ways to put students in contact with the new culture; 4) Teachers should give learners support before and after cultural contacts. They should have students discuss their expectations, how to develop relationships with native speakers, and their previous cultural experiences. Teachers should help students better understand their experiences to avoid the development of new stereotypes.

Moreover, Dörnyei (2001) also suggests that unless motivation is actively nurtured and protected during the actional phase of the motivational process — that is, when action has commenced and is well on the way — the natural tendency to lose sight of the goal, to get tired or bored of the activity and to give way to attractive distractions or competing action tendencies will result in the initial motivation gradually petering out. Therefore, an effective motivational repertoire should include motivation maintenance (or, executive motivational) strategies that can help to prevent this from happening. Although the spectrum of executive motivational strategies is broad (since ongoing human behavior can be modified in so many different ways), five areas appear to be particularly relevant for classroom application: 1) Setting proximal subgoals; 2) Improving the quality of the learning experience; 3) Increasing the learner's self-confidence; 4) Creating learner autonomy; 5) Promoting self-motivation learner strategies. As Davie and Pears (2000) points out, it should be concluded, from what has been discussed above, that motivation is essential for language learning. Some types of motivation are brought or not brought to the course by learners, for example, a real need for English. Others can be promoted or created by teachers — for example, enjoyment of topics, activities, and interactions. Teachers' relationship and rapport with the group and individual

learners is also very important.

Therefore, teachers should always bear in mind that motivation plays a crucial role in students' English language learning.

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