

Success in language learning

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Why are some students successful at language learning whilst others are not? If we knew the answer to that question the job of teaching and learning a language would be easy. We don't, of course, but we can point to a number of factors which seem to have a strong effect on a student's success or failure.

MOTIVATION

Motivation is a drive that encourages somebody to do something. If we perceive an objective and if that objective is attractive, we will be strongly motivated to do whatever is necessary to reach that objective. All teachers can think of situations in which motivated students do significantly better than their peers. We could say that students who really want to learn a language will succeed whatever the circumstances.

In general motivated students are probably easier to teach than those who have no motivation, so the difficult task for us, the teachers, is to motivate those students who bring no motivation to the classroom. For them what happens in the classroom will be of vital importance in determining their attitude to the language.

We can consider factors affecting motivation that we have to bear in mind when teaching a language.

1. The atmosphere

Physical conditions have a great effect on learning. Classrooms should not be overcrowded.

It is said that for learning a language successfully there would not be more than 15 students per class. Moreover, teachers should try to make their classrooms as pleasant as possible.

2. The teacher

In the first place the teacher's personality matters a lot. Students want a teacher who understands the children. But it is also important to motivate students through enjoyable and interesting classes: partly this come from such things as treating all the students the same and acting their hopes and aspirations. It is also important to be well prepared and to be teachers the students can have confidence in. In fact, teachers should be able to show that they know their subject and to give clear instructions and examples and as far as possible have answers to the students' questions.

3. Challenge

Success or lack of it plays a vital part in the motivation of a student. It will be the teacher's job to set goals and tasks in which most of the students can be successful. To give students very high challenge activities will not be appropriate and will have a negative effect on motivation because the students will not be able to do them. It will also be the case that low challenge activities are equally demotivating. If the students can achieve all the tasks with no difficulty they may lose the motivation that they have.

4. Methodology

The methodology by which students are taught must have some effect on their motivation. If they find it boring they will probably become demotivated, whereas if they have confidence in the teacher they would find it motivating.

Children are curious, and this in itself is motivating. At the same time their span or concentration is less than that of an adult. Children will often seek teacher approval: the fact that the teacher notices them and shows appreciation for what they are doing is of vital importance.

Children need frequent changes of activity: they need activities which are exciting and stimulate their curiosity: they need to be involved in something active and they need to be appreciated by the teacher, an important figure for them. It is unlikely that they will have any motivation outside these considerations, and so almost everything for them will depend on the attitude and behaviour of the teacher.

we can identify two main types of involvement which will increase students' motivation: mental engagement and actual occupation. We can increase the mental engagement element of an activity which is physically occupying but otherwise fairly mindless. For example, suppose we want to help children to make a list in their books of some of the words they have been using. They can just copy out the list from the board. There will be times when that is all we want them to do. But there will be other times when we want them to help them get the words firmly into their heads as well as into their books. Writing the word just one does not provide much practice and it is possible to copy out word or phrases without thinking what they mean. One way to increase mental motivation is to ask the children to list words in categories, for example, to practise words for the topic of animals.

In this way, we have retained the actual occupation of copying but the students have added to it the mental engagement of thinking.

It is also important to make a lesson varied if we want to increase students' motivation. Variation does not mean we have to keep changing the topic. It means to do different activities that together make a satisfying lesson. Doing different activities with flashcards, for all its repetition of the same five words, the children will not find the lesson repetitive or boring. Variation comes in the forms of activity. The children can feel their competence being built up as they tackle each new aspect of the work. They hear plenty before they speak, so that when they speak it comes out confidently and already fairly accurately. Reading and writing are built on the other skills so they confirm rather than confuse. There is mental engagement as well as actual involvement and the actual involvement is made simultaneous as often as possible. In this way, however big the class, any child has plenty to do in the lesson and plenty of language practice. The pace of the lesson is also managed so as to provide a shift from settling activity to stirring and back to settling. In this way, we can keep everything under control without that control having to be explicit. This improves the general atmosphere of the classroom. There is scope too for conscious focus on accuracy and correction as time for fun and real language use. There are times for work with the teacher, times with friends and times to work quietly alone.

CONCLUSION

We have seen that there are many different reasons for learning a language, and we have said that we are concerned with a classroom situation in which a language is studied. Most importantly we have mentioned that both positively motivated students and those who do not have this motivation can be strongly affected by what happens in the classroom.

We have seen that the teacher's personality is of vital importance: so too is the ability to provide motivating and interesting classes which are based both on a knowledge of techniques and activities and upon our ability to inspire confidence in our students and have answers to their questions.

To sum up, teachers must realise the important effect success has on motivation. We must be able to assess the students' ability so that the latter are faced with the right degree of challenge: success, in other words, should not be too easy or too difficult. ●

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