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EFL Motivation : Approaches and Problems

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Introduction

Familiarity with classroom motivational strategies is vital for educators to effectively teach English as a Foreign Language (EFL). As such, motivation topics are central in recent EFL research. This paper examines several learning and motivational concepts and discusses them in relation to Second Language Acquisition (SLA) and EFL. It provides a brief discussion on putting these educational motivational ideas into classroom practice. Further, it delves into the pitfalls and problems that many EFL teachers encounter with respect to unmotivated students and classroom dynamics. The paper concludes with an analysis of motivation strategies and provides useful recommendations for EFL instructors.

Theories of Learning and Motivation

During the 1950s and 1960s, the prevailing attitude of learning, especially in regard to SLA, was that the ability to learn had a great deal to do with a person's cognitive aptitude. The idea was that cognitive wherewithal determined one's capacity to acquire a foreign language. The conclusion of the era was that some individuals simply attained knowledge and foreign languages easily, while for others it was more difficult, and for others still, close to impossible (Dornyei and Schmidt 2001, p.94). Over time, however, after researchers examined both the psychological and sociological facets of SLA, they began to focus more on the "holistic context" in

which a foreign language is learned.

Holistic context here implies that learning a foreign language is not solely about memorizing words, phrases or a set of grammar rules. Instead, SLA, or even acquisition of one's own native tongue for that matter, is a societal process by which people discover how to interrelate effectively. While cognitive ability is certainly part of the language acquisition equation, equally important is the learners' capacity to identify collectively with people who actually use the language for everyday communication. In essence, language learners are successful if they are given the opportunity to use the target language in realistic social settings, as opposed to exclusively memorizing materials within the confines of a classroom (McKay and Hornberger 1996, p.12).

McKay and Hornberger (1996) consider learning to be both a cognitive and social process. Some students may easily memorize words and phrases; however, to approach the goal of fluency, even the top memorizers need to understand how to employ the words and phrases in the real-world. Virtually all SLA researchers and linguists concur that cognitively acquiring material from a language textbook exclusively will never be enough to engrain the language into working memory, where it can be recalled and used at will.

William and Burden (1997) believe that the "socio-educational" (p.116) theory is a central and

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influential SLA learning model. This learning concept postulates that language learners bring their cultural beliefs, preconceived attitudes regarding the target language, and their motivation levels to the SLA classroom, all of which affect their performance. The theory, however, holds that it is the motivation level that is the most important aspect of the language acquisition process. Hence, the theory maintains that if students are not adequately motivated to learn a foreign language they will not be successful (Williams and Burden, 1997).

Shimahara (2002) contends that recognizing students' different levels of motivation in the classroom is essential because it implies that instructors can encourage students' willingness to learn, regardless of their cognitive abilities, by applying certain motivational strategies. It is the teacher, therefore, who possesses a significant amount of control in creating learning environments where students, despite differences in ability and motivation, can all be encouraged to learn a new language. Once teachers recognize this idea of motivation, for learning to take place, they must not simply relay information to students; they are obliged to build encouraging relationships. The learning atmosphere must be enjoyable, participants must get along and trust one another, and students must feel that the instructor is supporting them in their efforts (Shimahara 2002, p.115).

Shimahara (2002) also argues that for this to occur, students must feel respected and educators must treat them with dignity. This is essential in SLA situations because students are often very self-conscious and anxious about making mistakes. The goal, according to the theory, is that once instructors create a setting of dignity and respect, students can develop confidence in both their social and cognitive abilities to learn and use a foreign language. While students bring their diverse and unequal motivational levels to the classroom, their levels are not static.

Instructors that are encouraging, therefore, can increase motivational levels. In this respect, Takac (2008) points out those SLA instructors should be keenly aware of the students' intent with regard to the learning process. This means that teachers will have to adopt interactive strategies that allow students to approach the target language from a variety of personal motivations.

Bridging Theory and Practice in EFL

Based on these theories and concepts, it is possible to present methodologies EFL instructors can employ with the greatest opportunity for success. One strategy centers on teacher-student interfaces. Rather than conducting lesson interaction as unidirectional, from the teacher to the student, McConnell (2000) argues that instructors should act as "communication facilitators" (p.213). This necessitates that the instructor does not simply lecture about structure, grammar and form, but that they fashion their lesson plans to focus on contexts where English is spoken and used in daily life.

McConnell (2000) believes this practice motivates students who do not possess the motivational level to hunker down and memorize words, phrases and grammar rules. By employing real-life contexts, unmotivated students have an opportunity to interact, thereby attaining a better understanding of how English is used. Because the instructor acts as a facilitator, as opposed to a lecturer, students feel more comfortable and encouraged when teachers make suggestions regarding usage and fundamentals, thereby boosting the learning dynamic. Instructors that use this approach do not focus entirely on ensuring that students readily understand the specific parts of the language or how the grammar is constructed. Instead, they want students to gain a level of understanding about how people communicate in English in authentic settings. McConnell (2000) points out that this approach

enhances student motivation because learners are able to immediately make use of their English in the classroom, and feel that they are involved in the process of acquiring a skill set that they can promptly employ.

However, for continued success, it is imperative that EFL instructors understand what motivates students in the first instance. Lumsdan (1994) bases motivation on the dual notions of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. Intrinsic motivation involves the positive feedback loop created when a student derives a personal sense of satisfaction from learning, leading to feelings of self-worth and accomplishment. These feelings then motivate the student to continue learning (Lumsdan, 1994). Extrinsic motivation, on the other hand, concerns one's desire to achieve an objective as "a means to an end" (Vockell, 2001, p. 21). This implies that extrinsic motivation involves student perceptions concerning the desire for pleasing outcomes, such as teacher praise, reward, or avoidance of punishment, rather than a true desire to learn for personal objectives. As such, extrinsic motivation suggests that students are completing tasks because they "have to" rather than "wanting to" (Vockell, 2001, p.22). Consequently, students who are extrinsically motivated have "the desire to learn a language because it would fulfill certain utilitarian goals, such as getting a job, passing an examination, etc.," while those who are intrinsically motivated have "the desire to learn a language in order to communicate with people from another culture that speak that language" and "the desire to identify closely with people the target language group" (Gardner and Lambert, 1985, p.117).

Along his line of thinking, Lins (2007) points out that if students' career aspirations, say in international business, motivates them to study English, then teachers should conduct lessons in which target dialogs transact model business transactions in a cross-cultural setting-not only to

educate, but to augment intrinsic motivation. Instructors can achieve this by relating words and phrases to actual business settings, demonstrating how particular words might be interpreted differently across cultures, and how expressions and mannerisms of the speaker affect communication.

Alatis (2004) argues that students process and retain information more easily when presented in the context for which they are motivated to learn. Rather than students feeling like they have to wait to use language skills for when they finally get jobs, if their intrinsic motivation is fostered, they feel as if they are acquiring communication tools that they can use immediately and effectively. Hence, they concentrate more on class participation and become more deeply involved in the classroom lessons because they appreciate the usefulness of their efforts.

Yet, it is important for teachers to apply flexible strategies when students have different learning styles, abilities and needs. In classes where students are mixed in their abilities and motivations, instructors should attempt to integrate all students by using a variety of teaching approaches. Using methods that focus on the business environment, for example, will not be effective for students studying English for travel or wishing to pursue English for academic purposes. Not all students may be motivated by the same thing; therefore it is essential to provide an assortment of materials, exercises and experiences that will get everyone involved (Alatis, 1990).

Pitfalls of Teaching English as a Foreign Language

One of the pitfalls that often occur in EFL teaching is the instructors' failure to use a diversity of methods in order to adapt to student needs and keep them motivated. Hinkel (2005) argues that instructors, when faced with difficulty in motivating

students, often resort to the “easy” and less time-consuming method of having their students rote-memorize. The assumption with this method is that it even outs the learning curve, implying that all students can learn equally using the same textbook, adhering to strict grammar formulae and memorizing sentence structure, words and phrases. While this method has to be employed sometimes to impart the most fundamental information, the reality is that due to differing levels of ability and motivation, many students not only feel lost in the midst of these types of lessons, they also lose any motivation that they might have acquired. Thus, to facilitate and maintain high motivation levels, EFL instructors must identify student desires and address those needs by creating lesson plans adapted for particular classes while bringing their own motivations, background and experiences in to the classroom. Further, they must employ a flexible array of resources that demonstrate that language learning is enjoyable and meaningful. In addition, teachers should make significant efforts to ensure that students recognize that mistakes are completely acceptable, if not encouraged, and that students are undeniably capable of realizing their language learning goals through sustained efforts (Hinkel, 2005).

Bailey and Nunan (1996) point out that another hazard that many EFL instructors fall into at some point in their careers is interpreting student silence to mean there are no questions or misunderstandings. Frequently, teachers ask students as a group if they have any questions or if they thoroughly understand recently presented material. As opposed to this common consolidation technique, Hinkel (2005), believes that instructors can instill confidence in their students by allowing students to demonstrate or explain new knowledge to each other. Further, Hinkel (2005) suggests that student-student interaction in language learning is an

essential component in developing communicative language skills. Instructors who are met with silence when seeking a response to their questions, therefore, must recognize student fears and anxiety about appearing ignorant if they ask questions or indicate that they need further assistance. Bailey and Nunan (1996) believe that many times, even experienced EFL teachers, take student silence at face value and move on to other lessons, while in actuality, students are lost, failing to adequately understand and, most detrimental to the learning process, becoming unmotivated. Accordingly, Hinkel (2005) states that involvement and interaction must occur through all stages of the lesson, especially during the consolidation phase, when teachers verify students’ understanding.

Conclusions

This paper examined educational and SLA theories, motivation strategies, and some of the problems instructors encounter in the EFL environment. The research demonstrates that SLA is not a purely academic exercise where instructors can lecture in a unidirectional fashion without regard to students’ motivational level, as, say, in mathematics. Instead, in order for EFL instructors to achieve success, they must encourage students by presenting interesting and, more importantly, meaningful, real-world communicative situations of student interest into the classroom. The study reveals that this method fuels enhanced intrinsic motivational levels. Instructors therefore, should encourage students to bring their personal interests and motivations into the classroom and allow them to manifest those interests during the course of instruction. It is also necessary for instructors to be flexible; that is, willing to alter their teaching methods or adopt different ones based on student needs. The research indicates that this approach is necessary for EFL success because individual

students always have different cognitive abilities and dissimilar degrees of motivation.

The research implies that instructors should employ integrative approaches that encourage active communicative classroom participation. Through examination of the data regarding the “socio-educational” learning model, it is evident that successful EFL lessons are associated with cultural perspectives, personal incentive, teacher/student relationships, and the use of teaching materials that are relative to the needs of both the learners and society. Teachers, therefore, must teach based upon student motivations and needs. In order to achieve this, instructors should adopt a “holistic context” educational technique by bringing a wide breadth of personal knowledge and experience into the classroom. To effectively teach EFL, it is simply not enough to have mastered English grammar and SLA theory – instructors must have an ability to be “communication facilitators” for an extensive range of topics dependent on student interests. If teachers accomplish this, and mesh it with a thorough understanding of the significance of personal motivation in EFL, then students will ultimately leave the learning environment more confident in their newly acquired language abilities.

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