

Student Motivation: An Enquiry into Principles of Language Learning

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Abstract

For many years there have been a series of “revolutions” in the profession of language teaching, the origins of the majority of these revolutions stemming from an attempt to achieve some consensus about the most efficient way of teaching a foreign language (Hadley, 2001). With English being the world’s most widely studied language, language teaching is a very prominent and practical concern (Richards & Rodgers, 2001, p. 1). Brown (2001, p. 54-55) maintains that the teaching of the English language has grown into a post-methodological era and that we teachers should base our pedagogy on key principles that will “form the core of an approach to language teaching.” This paper will analyze some of these teaching principles and examine closely their relationships to student motivation. Specifically, the results of a previous peer observation project, undertaken by the Peer Observation Committee (POC) at Asia University. It will be discussed with a particular examination of the participants’ findings on student motivation and its connection to the aforementioned teaching principles. This paper will analyze the significance of authentic materials and meaningful learning in language learning, as well as the area of reward in developing motivation. It will argue that meaningful learning should be at the core of the classroom experience. Furthermore, self-confidence, culture connection and attitude will be explored and shown to be essential factors for consideration in learning and teaching.

Introduction

The Center for English Language Education (CELE) at Asia University in Musashino City, Tokyo, Japan, is the English language teaching department. Within the faculty there are a number of committees tasked with various administrative and academic responsibilities related to the continued development of teaching, research and promotion of intercultural understanding at Asia University. The Peer Observation Committee fosters the instructional development of new and current lecturers through a voluntary Peer Observation Consortium (O'Mahony & Schwartz, 2018). The process involved observing five colleagues teaching Freshman English, taking notes, meeting with the observed colleagues individually for feedback and comments, and at the end of the year participating in a concluding forum to discuss the observations with other teachers. The 2017 forum was attended and chaired by Cian O'Mahony, and three CELE teachers (to be referred to as Instructor 1, 2 and 3 for anonymity). The minutes of the meeting were prepared by an attending teacher.

The latest developments in technology and society in the 21st century have brought changes to the education environment. Today, there are significant changes in classroom teaching approaches based on countless principles and theories put forward over many years of research. Motivation, however, is still probably one of the most important factors teachers target to improve the learning process. As far as previous research into motivation is concerned, there have been several theories put forward by scholars. Williams (2011), posited that the five essential ingredients, which impact motivation are: teacher, student, method/process, content, and environment. Very few teachers would disagree that motivation is essential in the language learning process and in order for successful learning to be achieved, motivation must exist on some level (Dörnyei, 1998). "Student motivation is an essential element that is necessary for quality education. How do we know when students are motivated? They pay attention, they begin working on tasks immediately, they ask questions and volunteer answers, and they appear to be happy and eager" (Williams & Williams, 2011).

At the concluding forum of the Peer Observation Committee's annual project, in December 2017, two teachers expressed particular concern with motivation levels of their students in that year and in previous years.

Instructor 1 noted that even though her students were both pleasant and polite, they rarely appeared motivated to learn. She was quite surprised to learn that some of her students expressed an interest in studying abroad yet their motivation remained low throughout both

semesters one and two. She noted that on a day to day basis, there were occasions when they became motivated through competition. She mentioned, for example, any time there were “team-centered” activities those students’ motivation levels seemed to spike. She observed similarly high motivation levels in another class, and noted that a deliberate strategy of the teacher was to appeal to the students’ competitive nature as most of the students were “sport scholarship” students. However, her frustration with her own class was that this motivation was short lived and a return to the status quo was inevitable. Instructor 1 expressed her concern that students who were openly interested to live and study in an English speaking country showed little or no motivation to improve the skills that would make that move more enjoyable and fruitful.

Instructor 2 suggested that he found motivating some of his classes particularly difficult as he believed the students could not see the value in learning the language as it would not play a role in their professional future. Some of his students expressed an interest in becoming police officers after graduation and he believed this was part of the reason there was little motivation from them. Although Instructor 2 admitted to having marginal success with some approaches, namely rewarding students, he felt that this motivation was also always short lived. He questioned if the lack of motivation came from the students’ frustrations of not being able to communicate effectively in English as his class was a lower level class.

Motivation is essential to successful teaching; however, finding the appropriate approach to motivation is just as critical to the teaching and learning process. By exploring some of the practical principles of motivating students to learn English, we can conclude how teachers can influence student motivation levels. Before this can be examined, we must first clearly define “motivation.”

Defining Motivation

Motivation, in most language education research, has most commonly been defined as an element that is connected to numerous constructs. Other scholars have used the characteristics of motivation as an approach to defining it. Brown (1994, p. 152) notes “Motivation is 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.” Essentially, it is the inner desire or wish that pushes someone to do a specific action. For an even more definitive look at motivation, research in Second Language Acquisition (SLA) see motivation in two

distinctions – integrative and instrumental motivation (Gardner, 2012). Furthermore, Gardner notes that when students have a desire to integrate immerse or identify themselves with the culture of the second language group – it is an example of integrative motivation. Furthermore, if learners have a desire to learn a language to reach goals such as graduating from university, higher salary etc., this is instrumental motivation. Finegan (2004) posits the type of motivation a learner has will affect how successfully they master a second language. We will now examine some of Brown’s teaching principles more closely and note the observations of the forum’s attendees

Teaching Principles

Meaningful Learning and Authentic Materials

Meaningful learning, as opposed to *rote learning*, effectively connects the students’ interests to what they already know, making it more practical and easier to integrate into their cognitive structure (Hadley, 2001). In a meaningful learning approach, students are the sole focus. They are not considered as empty vessels to be filled with lecture content. Rather they are provided with many learning opportunities including the benefits of learning from each other. In contrast, rote learning students are imposed to arbitrary rote memorization of facts and figures, a process which often will not be useful in their practical life. Meaningful learning must exist in order for learning to be permanent and effective (Ausubel, Novak & Hanesian, 1978). However, in order for meaningful learning to be achieved, the student must be willing to learn and display an intention to relate the new material to what is previously known. If not, the new information may be learned by rote learning if approached as a rote task (Ausubel et al., 1978). Critically, this principle can be quite redundant if the student is not motivated to learn. Connecting to what they already know is fruitless, if the learner has no interest in learning and this principle fails to allow for this, something all forum attendees agreed with.

Appealing to students’ interests is something a teacher should attempt at every opportunity. For learning to be meaningful, it must be active, constructive, intentional, authentic and cooperative (Grabe & Grabe, 2007). As discussed, meaningful learning allows learners to relate to previously learned information coupled with fresh knowledge ensuring better long term retention (Brown, 1994). This learning style is very purposeful and in context, so learners are fully aware of why they are learning.

Intriguingly, there was a slight difference of opinion between two instructors when it came to the subject of motivation from teaching materials used, at the POC's end of year forum. Instructor 2 felt that placing his students in a real-life learning situation and practicing the dialogue was more effective than drilling and noted spikes in contribution levels when the material felt more relevant to the students. Instructor 1 and the Chairperson agreed. Instructor 3 felt that, although he saw some value in this approach, he felt that instructing students to memorize a role-play which meant very little to them would only foster further rote learning.

This highlighted the importance of choosing authentic materials when it comes to motivating students. Gardner (2006) notes that the activities and materials chosen by instructors are crucial in influencing the student's motivation levels. Naturally, this increase in motivation will affect the chances of success when learning a language.

Anticipation of Reward

Human beings are driven by reward, tangible or intangible (Brown, 1994). In language learning/teaching, reward or *anticipation of reward* can provide considerable motivation to students, thus enhancing their academic performance and confidence. Skinner (cited in Brown, 2001, p. 57-58) noted that one of the most compelling factors in directing learner's behavior to their goals is the anticipation of reward.

At the P.O.C. end of year forum, all instructors generally agreed that it was very motivational for students to be told that extra marks would be given for speaking English consistently in the classroom. All instructors found this to be very effective for increasing contribution levels in the classroom as well as spurring other students on to contribute, as a result of witnessing their peers contribute. Instructor 1 elaborated on this point by saying she believed motivation breeds motivation and she believed some students had a fear of "being left behind" if they did not contribute orally. Brown (2001) and Snowman (1997) agreed that learners will pursue their goals if they perceive a reward for completing tasks. They also noted that it is imperative for teachers to reinforce the learners' behavior by using praise, words of encouragement or positive feedback. Instructor 2 claimed, especially in one particular low level class, he had noted a sharp increase in contribution which he perceived stemmed from words of encouragement they were given throughout their first semester with him. Instructor 3 felt that this encouragement, however, might be a short term solution.

On this topic, the forum attendees agreed that instructors should be striving to help their students see the long term rewards of learning English and not just in the short term. If

they can be successful with this, students should have higher levels of intrinsic motivation, which Brown (2001) believes is the most powerful reward to a student.

It should be mentioned, however, that (McCullers, Fabes & Moran, 1987) note that these extrinsic rewards are only positive in the short term as motivation may decrease once these rewards are attained. Their study concluded that although short-term change was achieved by reward, the effects were negative in the long term. Instructor 3 felt students become dependent on the reward system and lose all motivation when it is not there, something Instructor 2 agreed with. Instructor 2 expressed concern that occasions may arise when teachers may face the challenge of assigning an appropriate reward that will equally motivate every student. If the substance of the reward motivates one student more than another, surely this inconsistency of motivation has negative consequences.

Intrinsic Motivation and Automaticity

Intrinsic motivation is universally considered more effective as when this motivation is present, extrinsic motivation is nonessential as motivation comes from within the learner (Brown, 1994). He defines intrinsic motivation as activities learners do without the expectation or hope of any apparent reward except for the activity itself. With intrinsic motivation students possess a feeling of self-determination and competence and it is the student alone who will determine his/her success. Intrinsically motivated students apply themselves with the aim of attaining personal significant goals which requires them to work at a continuously challenging level of difficulty (Hadley, 2001).

Instructor 3 talked about the success he observed in other classrooms when the tasks given to students were designed to meet the intrinsic drives of the students. However, he questioned whether intrinsically motivated students were, more often than not, intermediate to higher level students. His reasons for this were that he witnessed very low levels of intrinsic motivation in, as well as his own class, the lower level classes he observed. This observation sparked quite a large debate amongst the forum attendees with Instructor 1 claiming that a lack of intrinsic motivation from some of her students was probably connected to their frustration with not being proficient enough to communicate in English and often not being able to complete the tasks successfully. The forum attendees agreed that the English proficiency level of the students most likely had some connection to their intrinsic motivation levels but that further study on this opinion was required. Instructor 2

mentioned that he felt creating a friendly environment for students to communicate in without the worry of correct grammatical structures or forms was pivotal to motivating his lower level students. He believed this promoted increasing levels of intrinsic motivation in his class as students could speak and contribute with more confidence.

Brown (1994) also discusses the idea of *automaticity*. This is the hope that the road to second language proficiency for the learner will be quite smooth due to automatic processing of details of the new language form(s), as a result of previous learning, practice or repetition of other language forms. Hadley (2001) explains that a substantial amount of “nodes” exist in our memory, that are associated with each other and become activated in sequence through learning. With automaticity, nodes become activated once a certain input occurs and with time and repetition this automatic response is remembered, becomes faster and is harder to suppress.

Instructor 3 suggested automaticity could be something that would promote intrinsic motivation in learners. He noted that students with a history of success in learning languages, L1 or otherwise, would feed off that success and that might translate into an increase in intrinsic motivation. Instructor 1 and 2 agreed but also noted that success in learning L1 does not always translate to success in L2, especially when grammar forms and structures are comprehensively different. All instructors agreed that connecting intrinsic motivation to automaticity is plausible but would need to be proven with further research.

The Language – Culture Connection

The language culture connection principle helps students understand a language more, as a language can help describe a culture. Since all cultures differ, there will also be a different set of relevant words and symbols in a language. Cultural words are required for everyday objects and expressions, and that's where students can learn. “The success with which learners adapt to a new cultural milieu will affect their language acquisition success, and vice versa, in some possibly significant ways” (Brown, 1994, p. 65). Teachers should ensure there should be a continuous conscious connection between language and culture in their teaching. Special care needs to be taken to avoid offending or alienating any student, creating or referring to any inaccurate stereotypes or presenting students with any form of cultural shock.

Instructor 1 felt that, although it was obvious, teachers should be continually searching for different ways to develop interest and motivation from the students. She thought that one possible way of increasing motivation was by learning the culture of their target language. Instructors 2 and 3 agreed definitively with Instructor 3 noting that it was one area of the learning process that he rarely had negative results in. He noted that his students, who were predominantly Japanese, seemed to “raise their game” when topics covering international cultures were introduced in class. He observed another class have high contribution levels in a lesson which was structured around international festivals. After consulting with the teacher he observed, the teacher commented that this was consistent behavior from his class when it came to these kind of topics. Instructor 2 noted that although he has continuous success when dealing with areas involving culture education, he felt that it could sometime become a distraction from the goals of some of the lessons e.g. grammar points. However, he felt, all in all, motivation and contribution levels were still often higher than normal.

Kitao (cited in Genc & Bada, 2005), pointed out that experts like Lambert and Gardner have proven that classes which involve culturally based activities and studying of people can motivate students. Furthermore, they noted that levels of interest and curiosity increased in classes which involves the study of culture. This motivation is likely to facilitate the language learning process and facilitate them to take control of their own learning and build self-confidence.

Self-Confidence

In his opinion, Brown (1994) believes *self-confidence* is only a partial factor to achieving success in a task. It involves students ultimately believing that they must achieve their goals unwaveringly. That belief will create a reality where their self-esteem, confidence and level of attainment are high by teachers encouraging students and creating an atmosphere where self-confidence can grow. Furthermore, self-confidence can have a mirrored effect on other students, and also on teachers, as they grow in confidence by observing a student’s self-esteem and self-efficacy grow. Brown (2001), says that teachers should sustain the self-confidence of learners where learners already have it or build it where it does not exist.

Instructor 3 felt that self-confidence is something that is just as important for teachers to possess as students. He noted that if learners have self-belief, accomplishing a task becomes less difficult and eventually will stimulate successful learning and, therefore, their motivation. In one of his observations of another teacher, he also noted that he felt students

“tapped in” to the teacher’s self-confidence and seem to feed off her confidence and positive energy.

Instructor 2 felt that teachers should always attempt to build students’ confidence by looking at how their own self-confidence grew as a teacher. He feels one of the most considerable challenges he faced as a novice teacher was having very little self-confidence. This idea was echoed by every instructor, with Instructor 1 feeling that understanding this problem would help her to understand the reasons for a lack of self-confidence in her students.

Other Factors for Motivation

Another area that was discussed regarding motivation was attitude. Specifically, the students’ attitudes towards the classroom environment, the teacher, the target language and fellow students. Gardner and Lambert (1972, cited in Richard-Amato, 1996) claimed that “The learner’s ethnocentric tendencies and his attitudes toward the members of the other groups are believed to determine how successful he will be, relatively, in learning the new language.”

Instructor 3 gave the example of a time when he read some of his students’ reflection journals and learned that some of his class had quite a negative attitude towards reading. Subsequently, these students’ levels of motivation were quite low when it came to reading assigned passages which they would later be tested on. He felt that by observing other classes, and specifically the successful reading sections of those classes, he was learning how to change the reading process in the class as well and, thus, their attitudes towards reading. Instructor 2 interjected here and felt that most of his focus over the last semesters has been on creating the right attitude towards learning their target language. He strongly believes that promoting the right attitude amongst students is something that will give more long term rewards than anything else. On this topic, Instructor 1 noted that as there are so many classes all with varying English proficiency levels, and most likely so many different levels of motivation, it should be imperative for each teacher to assess what types of motivation students arrive to their class with at the beginning of the year. She felt this would be invaluable for teachers and would allow them to direct their teaching accordingly. She went on to say that teachers should also be quite mindful of contrasting learning strategies various students may use. This comment brought the group back to agreeing on the importance of recognizing the needs of the students.

One further theory Instructor 2 offered regarding demotivated students was that the students in Asia University's Freshman English program were often overexposed to the same teacher, four times a week for 15 weeks, and again in semester two. He felt that, for example, organizing e-pal relationships with other students who are more advanced in their target language could help motivate students and provide a fresher attitude to learning. He also suggested inviting monthly speakers who are fluent in the target language to the classroom to, again, reinvigorate students' attitudes to the learning process. These ideas received positive feedback from the forum attendees but Instructor 1 felt that, although she saw the value of the idea of e-pal relationships, she felt this idea would be out of reach for her class as a result of their English proficiency level. Ricahard-Amato (1996) noted that increasing students' exposure to fluent speakers of the target language, notably peers, can be an exceptional means of increasing learner motivation.

Finally, Instructor 2 suggested increasing the use of technology in the classroom would motivate students more. He felt that the use of computers gives the students the feeling they are in control of their own learning process, an opinion that was widely agreed upon amongst forum attendees. As well as increasing motivation, Instructor 1 said that computers would also provide students with an opportunity to complete real-life, authentic, skill-building activities. She went on to say that using computers would not only be a dynamic tool to motivate students to learn the target language but also invaluable to preparing students for today's technological world.

Regarding the decision-making process of learning, Brown (2001) says that motivation is highest when learners are brought into the process. Furthermore, Roblyer (2005), notes that if learners see themselves in control of their own learning, the result will be intrinsic motivation.

Conclusion

In summary, assessing the types of motivation students have is pivotal to successful learning and teaching. Once this motivation has been identified, teachers can tailor their approaches and teaching process to create relevant, meaningful learning. All participants in the Peer Observation Committee forum felt there were low levels of motivation in their classes and classes they observed.

Connecting to the students' interests through meaningful learning is essential, but its success depends heavily on motivated students. Choosing authentic material may help with

this motivation, but as was noted, teachers can be wary of fostering further rote learning by asking students to memorize a role-play which means very little to them. Anticipation of reward was seen as a largely successful principle of teaching amongst all instructors, although not without its limitations. There was a significant belief amongst instructors that these rewards were short term solutions and that students would lose all motivation once these rewards were not there.

Motivation breeds from within, with intrinsic motivation being the most dependable form of motivation. However, all instructors queried whether high levels of intrinsic motivation were connected to higher level students only and that examples of this were rarely seen in lower level classes - an interesting area that would require further study. Based on their experiences, all instructors agreed that automaticity could increase intrinsic motivation amongst all students. Although motivation can often be sparked, it cannot be externally imposed, however, motivation building can be facilitated by words of encouragement, praise or reward. In addition to this, all instructors felt that exposing the students more to the culture of the target language was an approach that would promote higher levels of motivation, although there were some concerns regarding the possibility of distracting students too much from the class's main goals. All instructors placed building self-confidence and positive attitude, in both students and teachers, as vital tools to successful learning and teaching. . Building this confidence in students is crucial and can lead to changes in attitude. Further use of technology, outside speakers and e-pal relationships were all ideas supported by all instructors, but again, there were feelings that many ideas had limitations due to the proficiency levels of some classes.

Students need to assume responsibility for their own learning but by analyzing what motivates students, teachers can also help in this process. From a motivational aspect, a significant role of the teacher is to create a positive climate and attitude that encourages a clear and creative learning environment and that developing a communicative and collaborative force between teacher and student is imperative for motivation. Furthermore, teachers need to recognize that motivation is not just a fixed state but actually a dynamically evolving entity connected to the continuing learning process in an authentic context. Teachers should not consider themselves as simply deliverers of information, but rather facilitators of learning. By setting the appropriate stage for learning, teachers are giving students the best opportunity to be motivated and to channel their abilities into something productive.

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