

Tracking Dynamic Changes in Student Motivation in the English Discussion Classroom

Matthew J. McLaughlin

ABSTRACT

Motivation is an active area of inquiry, both within the field of second-language acquisition (SLA) and psychology. Judging an earlier study on motivation (McLaughlin, 2017) to be too static, the author decided to create a more dynamic research model. A graph capturing fluctuations in students' motivation levels throughout a discussion class was designed, with the aims of identifying the highest and lowest points of motivation during the class as well as factors influencing motivation. Overall, the highest point of motivation was a reflection activity owing to a sense of achievement or improvement after the second discussion, and eagerness to finish the lesson. In contrast, the lowest point of motivation overall was the fluency-building activity, due to sleepiness, time-of-day and perceived difficulty of the task. General positive motivational drivers included classmate/group members with whom students engaged, and involvement of the teacher. In contrast, general negative motivational drivers included difficulty and content.

INTRODUCTION

Motivation is an important but invisible factor, which can affect students' willingness to learn and rate of learning in either positive or negative ways.

As motivation is an internal element, not clearly visible to the observer (in this case the instructor), motivation researchers have proposed and designed several models in order to distinguish its different forms, categorize these forms of motivation and then measure them accordingly.

In the early days of research into motivation, Robert Gardner's (1985) socio-education model lay the foundations and paved the way for L2 motivation research which would build and grow over the years. As Dörnyei (2011) points out, Gardner's model, in which motivation was largely lumped into the dichotomies of integrative or instrumental orientation, now "has a rather historical feel about it" (p. xi) and most would agree that Gardner's model is too simplistic for a phenomenon as complex as human motivation.

As a shared awareness of some of the complexities involved in the field of human motivation, both within the fields of psychology and second language acquisition (just to name two) began to grow, new theories, constructs and paradigms also emerged. One fascinating theory that still resonates today is Weiner's (1986) attribution theory, in which "expectancy and affect, in turn, are presumed to guide motivated behavior" (p. 548). By "expectancy", Weiner is referring to the "expectancy of success or failure", which appears to be influenced by several causal factors. These factors, in the student's psyche, might be based on a student's own past experiences, concerns, worries, confidence, successes or failures and can influence or perhaps even govern their level of motivation, including in the language-learning classroom.

The word *motivation* comes from the Latin *move*, meaning "to move". Therefore, motivation-based research is the inquiry into what moves people. Some students experience the negative side of motivation, which is often referred to as "demotivation", and in some cases, motivation may even be absent (*amotivation*). Considering that motivation sometimes has a positive influence on performance of a given task, at other times displays a negative effect, and at yet other times is apparently absent, perhaps it is best to describe motivation in more holistic terms as "the potential range of influences on human behavior" (Dörnyei, 2011, p. 4). With so many possible influential factors involved in studying and measuring motivation – either physical,

psychological or social – it is fair to ask which factors related to motivation we should focus on in order to measure it.

This study was prompted by one of the limitations of the author's previous research into motivation (McLaughlin, 2017); that is to say that the earlier study was too static. Therefore, the author set out to design a simple classroom activity in which students' fluctuating motivational levels could be measured and examined more dynamically. This was one of the criticisms leveled at Gardner's (1985) own model. As Dörnyei (2011) said, "motivation does not remain constant during the course of months, years or even during a single lesson" (p. 6). In other words, it is in a constant state of flux and the author wished to hone in more on specific stages of an EDC lesson in which students may be motivated, demotivated, or amotivated.

The aim of this paper was first and foremost to shed light on which parts of the English Discussion Class (EDC) lesson students claimed to have felt the most motivated (called the "most motivated point" (MMP)) and the least motivated (the "least motivated point" (LMP)) across three types of lessons: a function-centered lesson, a communication skill review lesson, and a discussion test lesson. After discerning these specific points in the lesson, it was the author's hope to attain a better understanding of which parts of an EDC lesson appear to be more or less motivating for students in general. The second aim of this study, and directly linked to the initial aim, was to then find out from students (through completion of a questionnaire) why they were motivated, demotivated or amotivated at these particular points of the lesson, in order to share this information with other EDC faculty. This is important as, if teachers could share an awareness of which specific areas of the EDC lesson are more or less motivating to a large number of their students, they could then plan and adjust their lessons accordingly to make the lessons even more rewarding and enjoyable for their students.

Methods

In order to measure the fluctuations in students' motivation levels (i.e. dynamic changes in motivation) throughout EDC lessons, the author created a simple motivation graph (see Appendices A and B) in which students were asked prior to each stage and activity of the lesson to plot their motivational level at that specific moment in time. As there are three types of lessons which are typically taught in the EDC course, the author decided to approach students seeking their participation in this motivation graph activity in three lessons: namely, lesson 11 (a function-centered lesson), lesson 12 (a communication skill review lesson) and lesson 13 (a discussion test lesson). The motivation levels on the graph ranged from "very motivated" (highest point on the graph) to "very unmotivated" (lowest point on the graph) and students were asked to mark anywhere on the graph within this given range which best reflected their level of motivation at that specific point of the lesson (for more details, see Appendices A and B). As there is "little consensus on its (motivation's) conceptual range of reference" (Dörnyei, 2011: p. 3), the author decided to use the basic and general qualitative terms of "very motivated", "motivated" "slightly motivated", "slightly unmotivated", "unmotivated" and "very unmotivated". Students could decide for themselves where the range of their own motivation lay for any given activity in class.

While there are many theories on studying and measuring behavior and motivation, the author decided to apply a simple bottom-up grounded approach, in which comments explaining students' motivation in the EDC classroom (or the lack thereof) would be drawn from the students themselves, after which these comments would be interpreted and coded into respective categories of holistic motivational drivers.

The motivational graph activity was piloted in lesson 10 across two level 1 classes and in lesson 11 students agreed to participate in the study by signing a consent form, after reading a short summary outlining the purpose and aims of the motivation graph activity and the feedback

questionnaire in lesson 14.

In lesson 14 (the final lesson of the semester), students completed a short questionnaire (see Appendix C), in which they were asked to explain in detail their most motivated point (MMP) and least motivated point (LMP) in each of the three lessons. The collected motivation graphs were returned to the students in lesson 14, to make it easy for students to refer to their own motivation scores while completing the questionnaire. The questionnaire also contained some other questions on motivation asking students about general factors, which may or may not affect their motivational levels in positive and negative ways. The results of both the motivation graph activity and the questionnaire have been summarized in the Discussion section below.

DISCUSSION

In lesson 11 (a function-centered lesson), a total of 34 students enrolled in two level 1, two level 2 and two level 3 classes (6 classes in total) were able to complete the motivation graph activity. The “d2 reflection” stage at the very end of the lesson was the most often cited MMP overall. Only level 3 students, however, most often cited the “quiz” section at the beginning of the lesson as their MMP. In contrast, the “fluency” stage of the lesson was the most often cited LMP. Level 2 students, however, most often cited the “quiz” section at the beginning of their lesson as their LMP.

In lesson 12 (a communication skill review lesson), once again a total of 34 students enrolled in the same three levels successfully completed the motivation graph activity. As seen in lesson 11, the “d2 reflection” stage at the end of the lesson was the most often cited MMP overall. However, level 3 students most often cited the “d2” section (final discussion of the lesson) as their MMP. In contrast, the “fluency” stage of the lesson was the most often cited LMP, consistently across all 3 levels of students.

In Lesson 13 (the final discussion test lesson), a total of 38 students enrolled in the same three levels completed the motivation graph activity. (This difference in the total number of motivation graph activity returns was a result of better student attendance in Lesson 13). Similar to in lessons 11 and 12, the “reflection” stage was once again the most often cited MMP, marginally higher than “dt3” (discussion test 3) which was the second most often cited MMP. In this lesson, the “quiz” stage of the lesson was the most often cited LMP, perhaps partly due to the fact that the author chose to replace the typical fluency activity with a warming-up activity (in pairs). However, once again the results were slightly different for level 3 students, in which the “quiz” stage and the “warm-up” stage of the lesson were equally cited most often as the LMP of the lesson.

Reasons for High Motivation Cited by Students

As mentioned above, the most often cited MMP was the “reflection stage”, the very last activity of each lesson. In a follow-up questionnaire conducted in lesson 14, students explained in detail why they were most motivated at this particular point of the lesson. Responses were written either in English or in Japanese. In cases where the students wrote their responses in Japanese, the author has provided English translations below.

One student commented, “I did all of the discussion and achieved,” indicating a sense of achievement and fulfillment at the conclusion of the second and final discussion of the lesson as a possible cause of motivation. Other comments such as, “because the second time around (i.e. the second discussion), I was then able to use the functions with better skill,” and “because it’s the very last activity, I felt used to speaking,” indicate that students displayed a tendency to self-evaluate their own performance more positively at this stage of the lesson. Some students mentioned, “I think discussion is the main activity” and “because it was at the very end (of class), I thought I would give it my best” also indicate that many students probably perceive the second discussion as the most crucial part of the lesson, thereby influencing their motivation. As seen

above, most comments indicate that students' motivation levels were high prior to "d2 reflection" not because of the nature of the "d2 reflection" activity itself, but because of their high sense of motivation at the conclusion of the second discussion. Interestingly, only one comment from students possibly refers to the "d2 reflection" itself as a motivating factor: "because it's a test of whether I am able to make the most of the fruits of the lesson of that particular day." However, this "test" that the student mentions may possibly be alluding to the second discussion.

Similar reasons were cited in lesson 12 as to why the "d2 reflection stage" was the most often cited MMP. However, other external factors also appeared to have motivated the students at this final stage of the lesson: "because it's the discussion at the end of the class" and "because I felt that once d2 was over, I could go home." This indicates that the students were looking forward to the end of the lesson and this is consistent with the finding that most MMPs were in the second-half of the lesson. As level 2 students had to attend their lessons on a Saturday morning, one can easily understand this as a cause of motivation.

In lesson 13, the most often cited MMP was the "dt3 reflection" section. As seen in lesson 11, students appeared to have been most motivated at this point of the lesson, not because they were excited about participating in this activity per se, but because of their sense of elation that their final test had finished. Some students mentioned, "I felt our group discussion was great," and "because I thought I would get a good score on the test" and "I was happy that the final discussion test was over." Only one student appeared to have been motivated by the actual nature of the "dt3 reflection" activity itself: "because I wanted to come thoroughly clean on what I had regrets about in the final discussion test," indicating that this student was motivated to discuss areas which (s)he wished to improve in future.

Reasons for Low Motivation Cited by Students

As mentioned above, the "fluency" section was the most often cited LMP in lessons 11 and 12. In lesson 11, some students were not motivated to participate in the fluency activity for several reasons. One reason appears to be a general lack of confidence in the speaker role which they must perform in this activity ("because I'm aware that I am not good at it," "because I do not have the confidence to keep speaking for 3 minutes," "because I can't summarize well what I want to say in English," and "because I can never summarize what I want to say and get even more nervous"). Another reason for lack of motivation in this activity appears to be due to their perceived difficulty of the fluency questions ("the fluency questions were difficult," and "maybe it was a difficult topic"). A final reason for lack of motivation in this activity was simply the time of day in which this activity was performed ("because in the morning, when it (discussion class) is in the first period, I am not awake yet and am not excited", "because it was early in the morning and my brain was not working yet," and "simply, I was so sleepy.")

In lesson 12, students cited similar reasons for a lack of motivation in the fluency activity, namely owing to a lack of confidence in their speaking ability ("because I am not good at fluency" and "because my English didn't come out the way I thought it would"), fatigue/sleepiness ("because my brain is not working at the beginning (of class)", "because my body wasn't fully awake yet"), nervousness/pressure ("I really feel a lot of pressure because it's one-on-one," "I feel pressure to speak for 3 minutes to go," and "I can't relax to do it") or perceived difficulty of the activity ("because the themes were difficult, I didn't think it was appropriate for developing our fluency," "maybe hard topic" and "because this topic is difficult for me").

In lesson 13 (the final discussion test), once again students were least motivated in the early stages of the lesson (i.e. the "quiz" and "warm-up" stages). Similar to the results obtained in lessons 11 and 12, students' main reasons for their most often cited LMPs could be summarized under the same common categories; 1) time of day (early in the morning); 2) fatigue; 3) nerves;

and 4) perceived difficulty of the activity. However, one more factor appeared to influence students in this lesson: whether there was a test in that lesson or not. Some students explained that their lowest point of motivation in this lesson was due to the fact that, “it was both before and after the test,” “because I was nervous about the test and couldn’t really concentrate”, “I wasn’t prepared” and “because when I thought that the final discussion test was coming up next, my motivation didn’t go up,” indicating that their nerves regarding the discussion test had for most, but not all, a negative effect on their motivation levels. Interestingly, and in contrast, for level 3 students, the third discussion test (“dt3”) was the most often cited MMP. This motivation appears to have been borne out of their concern for their scores for the class: “because it was the final discussion test, I definitely wanted to leave a good score” and “I was motivated to get high scores.”

Other Factors Affecting Motivation

In the questionnaire distributed to students in the final lesson (refer to Appendix C), students were asked about whether certain general factors had any influence over their levels of motivation in this class. These factors were: content, difficulty, classmate/group member(s) with whom they conducted an activity, shortness/length of activity, involvement and non-involvement of the teacher, and test.

Overall, out of those students who cited that the classmate/group member(s) with whom they conducted any classroom activity was a factor, 74% responded that it affected their motivation in positive ways. The second most motivating factor cited by students was the involvement of the teacher, with 68% students, who mentioned this as a factor, responding positively. The third most motivating factor was whether it was a test situation or not, with 55% of students who mentioned this as a factor, responding in a positive manner.

There were some slight differences in motivating factors depending on the level of the class. For level 1 students, the most often cited motivating factor was the involvement of the teacher in the activity (75% of mentions). However, the small sample size ($n=14$) should be kept in mind. Among level 2 students, the classmate/group member with whom students conducted any given activity was overwhelmingly the factor, which received the most positive mentions (83% of mentions by level 2 students). For level 3 students as well, the classmate/group member with whom students conducted any given activity received the highest percentage (91%) of positive mentions.

As for factors which made students feel less motivated, difficulty (49%), content (40%) and length of the activity (32%) received the most negative mentions. However, it should be noted that overall, for none of these factors did the percentage of negative mentions exceed 50%. Level 2 students were an exception. Of those level 2 students who mentioned that difficulty was a factor affecting their motivation, 70% responded that the difficulty of the task made them less motivated in class.

One fascinating finding from the questionnaire was that while involvement of the teacher was often mentioned as a positive factor influencing students’ motivation (68% of mentions overall were positive), an equal percentage (68%) of students responded that *non-involvement* of the teacher did not change their levels of motivation at all. This appears to indicate that while students had a positive view of the teacher becoming involved (and sometimes intervening) in certain stages of the lesson, students were equally happy to conduct the activities *without* assistance from the teacher.

Limitations

There are several limitations of this study. First of all, a small sample size was used in lesson 11 ($n = 34$), lesson 12 ($n = 34$), and lesson 13 ($n = 38$). A second limitation is that students answered

the questionnaire in lesson 14, three weeks (or in some cases even later) following the completion of their first motivation graph activity (in lesson 11), meaning students may have had trouble accurately recalling the actual reasons for their own motivation or lack thereof at certain points of the EDC lesson. Finally, students were not provided with a definition of motivation, nor were they asked to define this term themselves. Therefore, students' own individual interpretations of the term "motivation" may vary, in which case the consistency and inter-reliability of their motivation scores would be affected.

CONCLUSION

This study succeeded in measuring fluctuations in students' motivation levels. While there appears to be many factors affecting students' motivation levels in positive and negative ways, students tend to be more motivated in the second half of the lesson and less motivated in the first half of the lesson. This appears to be partly due to their perception that the second discussion is "the main activity" of the EDC lesson and this perception is accurate. Given the relatively lower motivation scores for earlier parts of the lesson, such as the fluency-building activity, teachers may need to devise new ways to make this and other activities more exciting or motivating for students. Considering that classmate/group members with whom students conduct any given activity appeared to be the major motivational driver, teachers should keep this factor in mind when assigning students into pairs and groups. One of the most interesting findings of this study was that while many students were motivated by the involvement of the teacher in an activity, the non-involvement of the teacher did not affect their motivation levels significantly in any negative way. The implication of this finding is that many students may wish to become more autonomous students in charge of their own learning.

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APPENDIX A – Dynamic Motivation Graph Used in Lessons 11 and 12

FOR EACH PART OF THE LESSON, PLEASE SELECT HOW MOTIVATED OR EXCITED YOU FEEL TO PARTICIPATE IN THE NEXT SECTION OF THE LESSON (BEFORE THE ACTIVITY)



APPENDIX B – Dynamic Motivation Graph Used in Lesson 13 (DT3)

FOR EACH PART OF THE LESSON, PLEASE SELECT HOW MOTIVATED OR EXCITED YOU FEEL TO PARTICIPATE IN THE NEXT SECTION OF THE LESSON (BEFORE THE ACTIVITY)



APPENDIX C – Final Feedback Questionnaire on Dynamic Motivation Graph Activity

<p>Survey on University Students' Motivational Changes during EDC Lessons ディスカッションクラスのモチベーションの変化に関する調査票 QUESTIONS ON THE MOTIVATION GRAPH ACTIVITY 「モチベーション・グラフ」というアクティビティに関する質問</p> <p>Q1. In Lessons 11, 12 and 13 (DT3), your teacher collected a motivation graph from you at the end of class. Below, your teacher has tabulated your HIGHEST MOTIVATION and LOWEST MOTIVATION scores for each of these lessons. In the space provided below, could you specify why you felt MOST MOTIVATED or LEAST MOTIVATED at this point of the lesson? (OA)</p> <p>問1. レッスン 11, 12, 13 (ディスカッションクラス)三回目で、各自が記入したモチベーション・グラフを授業後に集計しました。各授業の自分自身のモチベーション・スコアが一番高かった・低かったところが、下記の表でまとめられています。以下の枠内、なぜこのステップで一番モチベーションが高かったのか・低かったのか、その理由をなるべく具体的に教えてください。 (自由回答)</p> <table border="1" style="width: 100%; border-collapse: collapse; margin-top: 10px;"> <tr> <td style="width: 50%; padding: 5px;">Lesson 11</td> <td style="width: 50%; padding: 5px;"> MOST MOTIVATED POINT —一番モチベーションが高かった箇所 Reason / 理由: LEAST MOTIVATED POINT —一番モチベーションが低かった箇所 Reason / 理由: </td> </tr> <tr> <td style="padding: 5px;">Lesson 12</td> <td style="padding: 5px;"> MOST MOTIVATED POINT —一番モチベーションが高かった箇所 Reason / 理由: LEAST MOTIVATED POINT —一番モチベーションが低かった箇所 Reason / 理由: </td> </tr> <tr> <td style="padding: 5px;">Lesson 13 (DT3)</td> <td style="padding: 5px;"> MOST MOTIVATED POINT —一番モチベーションが高かった箇所 Reason / 理由: LEAST MOTIVATED POINT —一番モチベーションが低かった箇所 Reason / 理由: </td> </tr> </table>	Lesson 11	MOST MOTIVATED POINT —一番モチベーションが高かった箇所 Reason / 理由: LEAST MOTIVATED POINT —一番モチベーションが低かった箇所 Reason / 理由:	Lesson 12	MOST MOTIVATED POINT —一番モチベーションが高かった箇所 Reason / 理由: LEAST MOTIVATED POINT —一番モチベーションが低かった箇所 Reason / 理由:	Lesson 13 (DT3)	MOST MOTIVATED POINT —一番モチベーションが高かった箇所 Reason / 理由: LEAST MOTIVATED POINT —一番モチベーションが低かった箇所 Reason / 理由:	<p>GENERAL QUESTIONS ON MOTIVATION モチベーション全般に関する質問</p> <p>Q2. Do any of the following factors affect the level of your motivation to conduct an activity in this class? For each of the following, first please circle any factor which applies. Secondly, from the options listed below, please circulate one, which indicates how this factor influences your level of motivation. (MA) Thirdly, please specify the reason why this factor affected your motivation and in what way it was affected.</p> <p>問2. 各アクティビティを行う際、以下のいずれかで、自分自身のモチベーションに影響を与えた要素がありましたか？まず、該当する要素にを書いてください。の場合、その要素がモチベーションを高めたか低めたのか度合いについても書いてください。最後に、その要素がモチベーションに影響した理由を回答してください。(複数回答)</p> <p>a) the CONTENT/TOPIC of the activity → MORE MOTIVATED / LESS MOTIVATED / NO CHANGE / UNSURE アクティビティの内容・トピック → (モチベーション) 高くなつた・低くなつた・変わらなかつた・不明</p> <p>Please specify why you circled the above (上記の項目を)-付けた理由を具体的に書いてください: <input type="text"/></p> <p>b) the DIFFICULTY of the activity → MORE MOTIVATED / LESS MOTIVATED / NO CHANGE / UNSURE アクティビティの難易度 → (モチベーション) 高くなつた・低くなつた・変わらなかつた・不明</p> <p>Please specify why you circled the above (上記の項目を)-付けた理由を具体的に書いてください: <input type="text"/></p> <p>c) the CLASSMATE / GROUP MEMBERS I am conducting the activity with → MORE MOTIVATED / LESS MOTIVATED / NO CHANGE / UNSURE → 同僚/グループメンバーと一緒に活動している → (モチベーション) 高くなつた・低くなつた・変わらなかつた・不明</p> <p>Please specify why you circled the above (上記の項目を)-付けた理由を具体的に書いてください: <input type="text"/></p> <p>d) Because the activity was LONG → MORE MOTIVATED / LESS MOTIVATED / NO CHANGE / UNSURE アクティビティ: 長い(例:2分) → (モチベーション) 高くなつた・低くなつた・変わらなかつた・不明</p> <p>Please specify why you circled the above (上記の項目を)-付けた理由を具体的に書いてください: <input type="text"/></p> <p>e) Because the teacher WAS INVOLVED in the activity → MORE MOTIVATED / LESS MOTIVATED / NO CHANGE / UNSURE アクティビティの先生の参加 → (モチベーション) 高くなつた・低くなつた・変わらなかつた・不明 →</p> <p>Please specify why you circled the above (上記の項目を)-付けた理由を具体的に書いてください: <input type="text"/></p> <p>f) Because the teacher WAS NOT INVOLVED in the activity → MORE MOTIVATED / LESS MOTIVATED / NO CHANGE / UNSURE アクティビティの先生の不参加 → (モチベーション) 高くなつた・低くなつた・変わらなかつた・不明 →</p> <p>Please specify why you circled the above (上記の項目を)-付けた理由を具体的に書いてください: <input type="text"/></p> <p>g) Because it was a discussion TEST → MORE MOTIVATED / LESS MOTIVATED / NO CHANGE / UNSURE ディスカッション・テストだったから → (モチベーション) 高くなつた・低くなつた・変わらなかつた・不明</p> <p>Please specify why you circled the above (上記の項目を)-付けた理由を具体的に書いてください: <input type="text"/></p> <p>i) Other - please specify: その他(具体的に) → (モチベーション) 高くなつた・低くなつた・変わらなかつた・不明 <input type="text"/></p>
Lesson 11	MOST MOTIVATED POINT —一番モチベーションが高かった箇所 Reason / 理由: LEAST MOTIVATED POINT —一番モチベーションが低かった箇所 Reason / 理由:						
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