

In recent years, I have had the privilege of visiting many classes around the world, to talk to teachers and sit in on their lessons. I remember very clearly one experience in particular which started me thinking about the whole question of motivation.

I was visiting a secondary school, and my first visit was to a first-year class of 11–12 year olds, early in their

class remained silent throughout. More significantly, there were two students who clearly couldn't care less – or so it appeared. One of them, sitting at the back of the class, had his feet on the edge of his desk, not a book, a pen or a piece of paper near him. He was removing what looked like motor oil from his nails. Every so often he would shout something out to another student, and receive a glare from the

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Andrew Littlejohn
tries to break the spiral of
declining enthusiasm.

school year. As soon as you opened the door, you could feel and see the motivation to learn in these students. They had bright eyes and smiles, and were eager to show what they had learned. They had been looking forward to the visit by 'the Englishman' and now the moment had arrived. Their bubbling energy was overwhelming, and so too was their desire to learn English.

Next lesson, I went a little further along the corridor to visit a second-year class, a year older. Here, the tone was very different – more purposeful, but more subdued, with none of the spark that I had seen just before. Their eyes no longer had a twinkle and the smiles were now replaced by a somewhat expressionless look on the faces of some students. We had a pleasant encounter, and they read short pieces of their work to me, but the overall tone was rather polite.

Next, I visited a third-year class, and here I found a quite different atmosphere. At the front of the class, there were a few students who were clearly interested in my visit. We talked about the things they liked and disliked in learning English, and their interests. It was, however, always the same students who talked, and most of the

teacher. The other student, also at the back, was asleep, with his head flopped over his desk and no sign of any school equipment near him.

Many teachers, I am sure, will recognise the scenarios here. They are, in fact, situations that I have since seen time and time again in my visits to

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schools. Many teachers, too, will also recognise the sketch of the 'couldn't care less, don't want to learn' students. The most striking thing for me, however, was the transition from the first-year students – all seemingly eager and energetic – to the third-year class, with some students now apparently

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▶▶▶ completely negative about their learning. Assuming that the third-year class had once been like the first-year class, what had happened in the intervening years? Where did the students' initial motivation come from? And where did it go?

Sources of motivation

It would be difficult, if not impossible, to point to a single factor which accounts for the apparent changing levels of motivation and involvement that I had witnessed. As all teachers know, and as Marion Williams in an earlier article (ETp Issue Thirteen) has explained, there are many, many factors which affect students' commitment to

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study. Many things – perhaps most – are beyond our control as language teachers, and fall outside the confines of the few lessons that we have with them in a week. Home background, physical tiredness, events in their personal life, health, previous educational experience, personality and the onset of adolescence are just some of the factors that can affect how individual students appear to us in our classes. Nevertheless, I believe that in many cases, the explanation of why the smiles disappear from the faces of some students, whatever their age, may indeed lie in their experience of their English classes – in short, in how their classes are organised.

In very general terms, educational psychologists point to three major sources of motivation in learning (Fisher). Simply put, these are:

The learner's natural interest: *intrinsic satisfaction*

The teacher/institution/employment: *extrinsic reward*

Success in the task: *the combination of satisfaction and reward.*

Intrinsic satisfaction

Sad though it may be, we must, I believe, recognise that only a relatively small number of students get a sense of *intrinsic satisfaction* from learning English. For the vast majority of people, language is not, in itself, very interesting, and it is unlikely to spark, and still less to sustain, motivation. For some older students, the satisfaction of learning and using a foreign language may be connected to what Gardener has called an 'integrative motivation' – a desire to identify with the culture of the foreign language. However, this is not widespread and it is not likely to be the case with younger students. Some teachers of younger students endeavour to relate to what they see as their pupils' sense of intrinsic satisfaction by using games, songs and puzzles in the class. Often these have a positive impact in raising the motivation of the students, but the effect is usually

temporary, and once they return to normal classroom work, the effect wears off. In general, then, the student's natural interest is not something which we can rely on to generate sustained motivation in language learning.

Extrinsic reward

Aware of this, many teachers, and indeed whole educational systems, turn to a second source of motivation: extrinsic reward, and its opposite, extrinsic punishment, as a means of

motivating students. In the classroom, for example, teachers may reward students with good marks, or, in effect, punish other students with low marks. 'Better' students may be rewarded by being given more advanced work to do, or by being placed in a higher level group, which increases their sense of self-worth. The principal problem with this approach, however, is that rewards only lead to sustained motivation if you actually receive them. For the failing student, unlikely to be rewarded, it does not take long to work out that it is always someone else who gets the rewards – no matter how hard you work. The reward system itself can, therefore, be demotivating for the weaker students. The increase in the motivation of the better students is more or less proportional to the decrease in motivation of the weaker students.

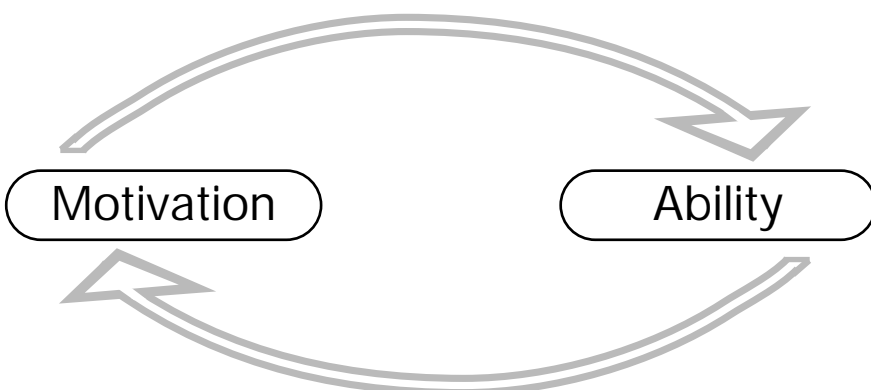
Success in the task

While teachers and school systems have drawn on both of the first two sources of motivation, the third source is perhaps under-exploited in language teaching. This is the simple fact of success, and the effect that it has on our view of what we do. As human beings, we generally like what we do well, and are therefore more likely to do it again, and put in more effort.

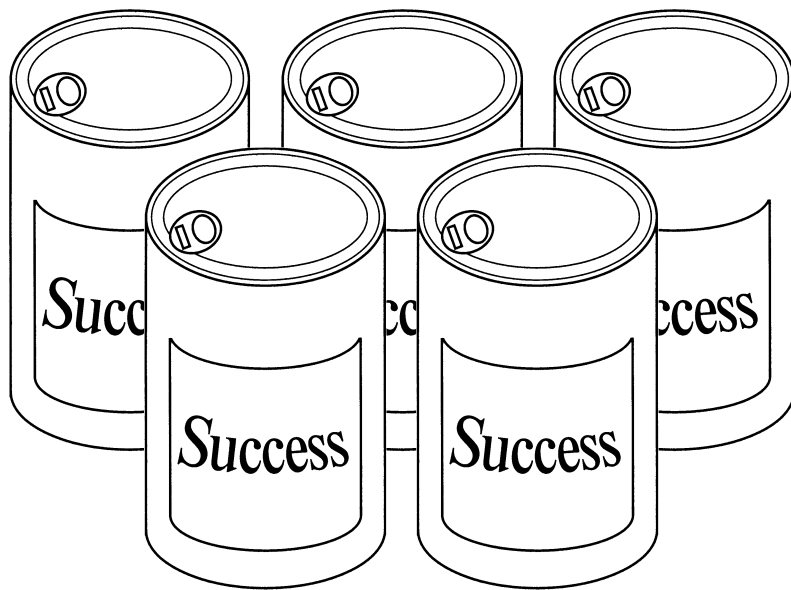
If we put in more effort, we generally get better, and so this sustains our motivation. Feelings of being able to do something and feelings of sustained motivation can, therefore, be linked into an upward spiral which causes us to commit ourselves to what we are doing, and to improve.

Perceptions of failure

Unfortunately, for many students, this spiral relationship between motivation and ability can function in reverse. Few people like to fail and we generally avoid circumstances in which we



Success comes in 'cans'



Not 'can't's'

anticipate failure. In the classroom, this can mean that students who develop an image of themselves as 'no good at English' will simply avoid situations which tell them what they already know – that they aren't any good at English. Feelings of failure, particularly early on in a student's school career, can therefore lead to a downward spiral of a self-perception of low ability → low motivation → low effort → low achievement → low motivation → low achievement, and so on. It is the existence of these upward and downward spirals in the motivation-ability relationship that explain a situation commonly found by teachers. In many classes where there are differing levels of student ability, the gap between the 'weaker' students and the 'stronger' students appears to get wider and wider over time, as some students thrive in an upward spiral, whilst others actually deteriorate in a downward spiral.

The attempt by some students to avoid recurring failure suggests that we need to rethink some of the beliefs that we may have about them. While it may be true that the students with their feet on the desk at the back of the class really aren't interested in learning, it may equally be true that what they are actually trying to do is to avoid repeated failure – by pretending that they don't care. It is their sense of self-esteem that is at stake here. By

pretending that they aren't interested and don't want to learn, they can protect themselves from seeing themselves as failures. Such extreme displays of lack of interest or rejection of learning are probably at the bottom end of a downward motivation-ability

spiral. For many students, the spiral will have begun long before, as they learned to see themselves as failures, and then began to engage in various kinds of avoidance strategies – sitting at the back of the class, choosing a seat where they wouldn't be noticed, misbehaving, pretending illness at crucial moments such as tests, and blaming failure on the teacher or the school or other students.

Self-esteem and confidence

What all this points to, I think, is that we shouldn't underestimate the importance of self-esteem and a sense of competence in language learning as

crucial factors affecting motivation. For the failing student, in particular, it is important that we try to develop their sense of success and a feeling that they can do something, rather than a feeling that they can't.

In practical terms, this means that we need to be sensitive to the psychology of language learning. When we plan a lesson, devise a test, or use a particular type of exercise, we should ask ourselves a very important question: how will the weaker students feel if they can't do this? Let me give an example. One of the commonest exercises used in language classrooms is the gap-fill. This is a text with every seventh or so word missing, which the students have to supply. Confident, motivated students who have a history of success are likely to approach such an exercise feeling that they have done it before and, as they have usually done well, they will probably be able to do this one too. And, if they do complete the exercise successfully, they will have in front of them confirmation of what they already knew, and their confidence and motivation will be renewed again. Weaker students, however, may have exactly the opposite experience. Previous failure may create a lack of confidence as they approach the task, and if they find that they can only complete one or two of the gaps correctly, then once again they are

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presented with a picture of what they can't do – and so the spiral relationship of motivation-ability takes another step downward.

I do not want to suggest by this that we should never use gap-fill exercises. Used appropriately, they can serve a very useful purpose. The basic point I do wish to make, however, is that there is a psychology involved in everything we do in the classroom, and that this is concerned with the students' feelings of success/failure, high/low self-esteem, high/low confidence, and this has a direct impact on motivation. Viewed in this way, we may be able to understand some of the reasons why, over time, motivation may fail, and

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▶▶▶ explain the differences in the three classrooms I described at the beginning of this article. It suggests that where we see students beginning to fail and beginning to lose motivation, one route to repairing the situation may lie in choosing tasks which we believe the students can do, in order to develop a sense of competence and confidence. It also suggests that all students need to feel a sense of progress and that their efforts actually lead to results.

Feedback

One important element in shaping the students' view of themselves is the feedback that we give them. Research has shown that even very young children, in their first years at school, are able to identify who the 'clever' students are and who the 'not very clever' ones are. They do this by monitoring the teacher's oral feedback, and develop a fairly clear picture of where they stand in the classroom league table. The importance of this in shaping the students' self-esteem, feelings of competence and, therefore, motivation cannot be underestimated. It suggests that we need to be very careful about how we give feedback, who gets praise and who doesn't. It also suggests that we need to be careful about the *type* of feedback that we give students, and whether it recognises and values effort, content, ideas and potential.



To end, here is a list of some practical suggestions which you may like to experiment with; you will find more examples and practical accounts in Breen and Littlejohn. There is no 'magic formula' for sustaining motivation in learning. As the first point in the list says, we need to experiment and take risks. The starting point, however, should be to try to understand why some students are not motivated, and not simply to blame them for not being interested. If we start from the assumption, which I believe is true, that all human beings in the right circumstances are naturally motivated to learn, we need to ask ourselves: where does that motivation go? **EP**

Maintaining motivation

- 1 **Experiment, take risks.**
Vary the kinds of things you do in the classroom. See what different students respond to best. For example, try short stories, films, classroom drama, songs, projects, grammar exercises, dictations.
- 2 **Choose 'larger' tasks.**
Choose tasks that give students more 'psychological space' to plan their own work, set their own pace and make their own decisions about how and what they do. For example, process writing and simulations.
- 3 **Choose open-ended tasks.**
Set tasks that different people can respond to in different ways, where the absence of a 'single right answer' means that everybody's work can be valued. For example, making posters, writing poems, creating designs and describing them.
- 4 **Provide choice.**
If people are involved in deciding what to do, they are usually more committed to it. Instead of saying 'do this', say 'you can choose exercise 3, 5 or 9. Or if you'd like to do something else, ask me.'
- 5 **Involve students in classroom decision-making.**
Many of the decisions that teachers make can often be shared with the students, without any risks to the course as a whole. You might be able to share decisions about when homework is set, how long they will spend on a particular task, what they will do next lesson and so on.
- 6 **Find out what students think.**
Find out if students have suggestions of their own, if they think they need more practice, if they find things easy or difficult, boring or interesting. You could place a 'suggestion box' in your class, write an open-ended letter that students could complete with their ideas, or devise short questionnaires.
- 7 **Think about your feedback.**
Consider how you give feedback and what you give it on. If you can identify students who are beginning to sink, try to identify aspects that you can praise and encourage. Instead of just giving low marks, explain to the students, in concrete terms, what they could do to improve their marks next time.
- 8 **Communicate a sense of optimism.**
Communicate a belief that everyone can learn. Encourage students to try, to take risks without fear of losing marks or feeling stupid. Give help when they ask for it and show them how much they have learned.

Breen, M P and Littlejohn, A P *Classroom Decision-Making* CUP 2000

Fisher, R *Teaching children to think* Basil Blackwell 1990

Gardener, R C *Social psychology and language learning* Edward Arnold 1985



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