The Tip of the Iceberg:

Factors Affecting Learner Motivation

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Abstract ■ Teachers' informal discussions of learner motivation often emphasize the need to find ways to motivate learners, most usually through 'fun' or 'dynamic' activities. This paper starts from the assumption, however, that part of the work of the teacher is to avoid the *demotivation* of learners, and that there is a need to consider the overall structural organization of teaching and learning, not just the kinds of activities which learners do. The paper reviews four factors significant in affecting learner motivation: *the locus of control, a sense of value and purpose, self-esteem,* and *feelings of success.* These concepts are then used to interpret interview data from two school-aged learners. The causes of their apathetic reaction to English classes are explained by reference to these factors, as evidenced by how they describe the nature and purposes of the activities they do. They appear to see their classes as mainly consisting of 'exercises', free of any memorable content. It is suggested that they experience their classes as 'endlessly contemporary', with no clear sense of a past, present or future and that that, combined with a lack of involvement in classroom decisions, conspires to produce learners who simply comply because they are required to do so.

Keywords ■ locus of control**,** motivation, purpose**,** school-aged learners, self-esteem**,** success.

Introduction

In this paper, I want to explore some of the key issues that have emerged in the debate on factors relevant to motivation in learning, and to see how far this debate can help us to understand the nature of learner attitudes. Although I will take as my focus for analysis data obtained through an interview of secondary school learners, the issues that emerge obviously

have relevance to learners of any age, as we speculate on the psychological reality that may lie behind what they say. The metaphor of 'the iceberg' in my title is a very appropriate one, since what we see in the classroom in the form of apparent learner attitudes and actions is only the perceptible 'tip' of much deeper factors at work. Since it is naturally on the basis of apparent classroom behaviour and attitudes that teachers most usually make judgements about learners, their level of interest and participation, it is important to consider whether those judgements are correct, or whether 'the tip' we are looking at is causing us to misinterpret. It is, after all, not the tip of the iceberg which eventually sinks the proverbial ship, but the much larger, denser mass beneath it.

Before I turn to the interview data, I want to first set out some important concepts which aid in interpreting what the respondents say. The concept of motivation has typically been seen as consisting of two major sub-types: *intrinsic motivation* (resulting from an interest in the subject/ activity itself—that is the pleasure gained from learning or doing something), and *extrinsic motivation* (resulting from external factors of reward or punishment). In the discussion of language learning, this classification can be found in the concepts of 'integrative motivation', such as a desire to learn a language in order of identify with the target language culture, and 'instrumental motivation', such as a desire to learn in order to get a better job (Gardner 1985).

One outcome of the intrinsic/extrinsic classification of motivation is that it conditions our understanding of how learners approach language study. Given that language itself is likely to be of intrinsic interest to only a relatively small percentage of the population, particularly amongst those in compulsory education, extrinsic motivation is usually emphasized. In school contexts, this often leads to systems of reward ('gold stars', teacher's praise, prizes, high grades etc.) or, if viewed as necessary, punishments (low grades, disciplinary measures etc.) in order to motivate learners to learn. In the discussion of teacher-learner relations, learner motivation is thus often seen as the responsibility of the teacher. Teachers, therefore, are frequently concerned with how they can motivate reluctant learners, and how they can sustain that motivation. The recurrence of words such as 'fun', 'interesting', 'exciting', 'dynamic' and 'innovative' in the cover blurb of many published course materials, for example, attests to the fact that teachers are generally looking for classroom activities which *stimulate* learners to learn. Regretfully, however, it not uncommon to discover that 'fun' activities only have a temporary effect, and when the

class returns to 'business as usual' the same reluctance to learn appears again.

While many teachers, particularly in schools, struggle hard to motivate learners, much of the literature on the psychology of motivation suggests that lasting motivation is not something which is stimulated externally, but something which naturally arises in conducive circumstances. As Dörnyei (2001: 50) says

> Psychologists often view little children as motivationally 'innocent' and 'uncorrupted' because they seem to possess a natural curiosity about the world and inherent desire to learn. This is, in fact, often cited as a proof that the motivation to learn, just like the ability to acquire language, is an innate characteristic of the human species.

As Dörnyei goes on to say, this is very far from the reality which confronts most teachers, with reluctant learners who often describe their classes as 'boring' and 'constrained' (Wong and Csikszentmihalyi 1991). If the established view from the psychology of motivation is at least partially correct, however, there is something about the very organization of teaching and learning that, for many learners, systematically *kills* their motivation to learn—as one can witness in the often deteriorating levels of pupil involvement as they go up the years in secondary schools (see Littlejohn 2001, for an analysis). According to this view, therefore, the teacher's job can be seen not only as *motivating* learners, but also as avoiding their *demotivation*, through paying particular attention to the structural organization of learning and teaching.

Aspects of a Description of 'Conducive Circumstances'

The literature on motivation has established many elements which are held to be significant in affecting learner motivation (see Williams and Burden 1997, inter alia, for a rich discussion of these) but in what follows, I want to focus on four key aspects of a description of 'conducive circumstances' for sustained motivation. As we will see, these raise useful insights in interpreting the data I will present in the subsequent section. The aspects which I will discuss are: *the locus of control, a sense of value and purpose, the preservation of self-esteem,* and *feelings of success.*

The Locus of Control
The concept of the locus of control owes its origin to Rotter's (1954) social learning theory of personality. The concept is now well established

within research on motivation and refers to people's beliefs about where control over their actions lies, and the impact this can have. The locus of control can be 'internal', that is a person believes that he/she has direct control over events, or 'external', that is, a person believes that factors beyond his/her control determine events. Research suggests that a person's beliefs about the locus of control are built up over time, partly as an element in the development of 'personality' and partly as a result of their social situation. Males, for example, tend to see the locus of control as more internal than external, as do older people and people in the upper levels of a hierarchy (Mamlin, Harris and Case 2001).

The significant point here, however, is that an internal locus of control is generally associated with greater levels of sustained motivation (Williams and Burden 1997: 128). That is, if people feel they have control over something, that they are engaged in real decision-making, then they are more likely to feel committed to it. Note that this concept actually refers to an individual's *beliefs*, which may, in fact, be at variance with reality—for example, the belief that one cannot do anything about a situation when in fact one can. However, for an internal locus of control to have any real meaning and impact, the conditions for exercising meaningful control must actually exist.

A Sense of Value and Purpose

A mismatch between teachers' and learners' purposes in the classroom has been documented by a number of researchers (see, inter alia, Jing 2006; Hawkey 2006; Barkhuizen 1998; Peacock 1998; Slimani 1992). Nunan (1989), for example, shows in a graphic form how ratings of the value of different kinds of classroom activities (conversation, games, self-correction of errors, etc.) provided by learners and teachers in the same institution were almost a mirror image of each other. That is, activities which learners rated as having 'high/very high value' tended to be seen by teachers as having 'low/very low value. In situations of such stark contrast as Nunan describes, it does not take much to imagine the feelings of resistance that would develop as one party reflects a 'progressive' orientation (in this case, the teachers) while the other party adopts a much more 'traditional' orientation (in this case, the learners). Nunan (1995: 134) sees this kind of gap as a cause of a mismatch between 'what is taught and what is learned': 'While the teacher is busily teaching one thing, the learner is very often focussing on something else'.

Clearly, what Nunan and others are pointing at here is a gap in the way in which teachers and learners each perceive classroom activities. Nunan

speaks of a mismatch between the 'pedagogical agenda' of the teacher and the learners, although many teachers would (not altogether cynically) affirm that their learners often have *no* pedagogical agenda whatsoever. Certainly, where learners see no purpose or value in what they are asked to do in the classroom, we are unlikely to see high levels of motivation, if at all. At the very least, then, we can say that it is the responsibility of the teacher to explain *why* it is useful to do a particular activity and how that activity relates to the wider goal of learning the language.

The Preservation of Self-esteem

In the literature of psychology, a cluster of terms appear which overlap or closely relate to the notion of self-esteem. Among these we can identify *self-worth* (Covington and Teel 1966) *self-efficacy* (Bandura 1986), *self-concept* (Canfield and Wells 1994), and *self-confidence* (Clément *et al.* 1994). For my purposes here, I do not wish to go into the details of each of these terms, but to note that all research in this area stresses the importance of views of *self* in affecting levels of motivation and achievement. The preservation of our own self-esteem is an important drive in human interaction—popularly known as 'saving face'—and we will often go to extraordinary lengths to do this. Fisher (1990: 242) lists a number of 'coping strategies' which children, for example, may use when they feel the threat of failure (and the consequent threat to self-esteem):

- Avoidance—*If I keep quiet, I won't be noticed*
- Blaming others—*It's his fault not mine*
- Denying reality—*What does she know anyway*
- Insulating self—*I just don't care*

Covington and Teel (1996: 27-28) list similar failure-avoiding strategies, such as '*Non-performance*' (simply not doing the required task), '*Taking on too much*' (making it impossible to succeed), '*Setting impossibly high goals*' (so that failure is inevitable) and '*The academic wooden leg*' (in which failure is explained by a minor setback). Versions of these survival strategies can be seen at work in many classrooms (Littlejohn 2001), and can range from the student who quietly withdraws to the student who shows open hostility. While teachers may frequently interpret a student's behaviour as evidence that he/she does not wish to learn, consideration of the role of self-esteem may indicate that the reverse is actually true—that the student's behaviour is actually a defensive reaction to a fear of failure and the consequent impact on self-esteem. Clearly, what I have termed

'conducive circumstances' for maintaining learner motivation involve avoiding situations that are experienced as significantly threatening to learners' self-esteem.

Feelings of Success
The corollary to avoiding face-threatening situations in the classroom is the provision of opportunities which enhance feelings of success—as the old adage goes 'success comes in *cans*' (Littlejohn 2001). Feelings of success fuel motivation, as achievement enhances self-image and confidence in an upward spiral in which increased levels of achievement enhance motivation which in turn leads to further increases in achievement. Thus, classroom tasks which are matched to the ability level of learners and which reveal what their strengths are, rather than expose their weaknesses, are especially important in cases of low levels of motivation. But we can also translate this into a wider requirement for 'conducive circumstances', in that opportunities for learners to see what they *can do* are important in developing a sense of competence and purpose.

With these four requirements for 'conducive circumstances' in mind, I would now like to turn to some interview data from two school-aged learners. As I hope I will be able to show, the data suggests a lot in terms of the presence or absence of these requirements, and how they manifest themselves in what the learners say.

An Interview with School-aged Learners: Sirena and Raffa

The interview data which I set out here was gathered as part of an informal research project, in which, over many years I have asked school-aged learners in many parts of the world how they experience their English classes. I have chosen the following extract since I believe it is fairly representative of the kind of responses I have received from school-aged learners, regardless of sex, country, culture, public or private education, and so on. In addition, the numerous teachers with whom I have discussed the data have had no hesitation in admitting that they would anticipate their learners replying in similar ways, something which I would expect to be true for the present reader.

The interview extracted here took place in the home of 'Sirena' in Italy (all names changed). Immediately behind her, with his back to the interviewer (the present writer), was 'Raffa'. Raffa was engrossed in a computer game, but listening to the conversation. My aim was to reveal

Sirena's attitude towards her English classes, and what she believed to be the purpose of the activities her teacher asked her to do in the classroom. Conversation with Sirena and Raffa's teacher previously revealed that she considered both of them to be working at a 'satisfactory' level. The interview was conducted in Italian.

Transcript: I = Interviewer, S = Sirena (aged 12), R = Raffa (aged 13). All names changed.

! exclamation; __ emphasis; (…) slight pause; *italics* Italian word or expression.

Note: *Boh* is an Italian expression meaning 'I don't know', often additionally suggesting through intonation and body language '…and I don't really care'. *Riassunto* is a common feature of Italian schools, roughly equivalent to summary or précis writing. *Insomma,* here, with body language, probably means 'not very much, could be worse'.

I: What are you doing in English?
S: What?
I: What are you doing in your English lessons?
S: *Boh*! (…) Exercises.
I: Well, what did you do last lesson?
S: Er (…) Raffa, what did we do last lesson?
R: Er (…) jeans.
S: Oh yes we read a passage about jeans.
I: Why did you read about jeans?
S: What? The teacher asked us to read it.
I: Yes, but why did the teacher ask you to read it?
S: To learn English!
I: What did you do with it?
S: Er (…) Raffa, what did we do?
R: *Riassunto*.
S: Oh yes we made a summary.
I: Why did you do that?
S: Because she wanted us to write.
I: Did you do anything else with the passage?
S: Yes we answered some questions.
I: What questions?
S: From our book.
I: Why did you answer *those* questions?

S: I don't know! she wanted to test our comprehension.
I: What are you going to do next lesson?
S: *Boh*!
I: Raffa what do you think you are going to do next lesson?
R: We've got a test.
I: Do you like English Sirena? (…) Raffa?
S: *Insomma.*
R: Sometimes we watch videos.

A general reading of the extract suggests that Sirena and Raffa are less than enthusiastic about their lessons, and in fact seem mainly tolerant of what they asked to do. This is borne out by their final utterances. Asked if they like English, Sirena says '*Insomma*' (l. 30), here with the meaning of 'Not very much, could be worse', while Raffa, somewhat cynically perhaps, says '*Sometimes we watch videos*' (line l. 31), which by implication suggests that other aspects of their lessons are less than stimulating. On the face of it, it may be argued that an immediate explanation for their cool reaction to English is in the information we have about what they do in their lessons—complete exercises, read texts, answer comprehension questions, write summaries, do in-class tests, and so on. But this explanation is not a sufficient explanation as there is nothing inherently 'boring' about any of these activities (or any other activity). Instead, I think we can look between the lines of what Sirena and Raffa say to reveal what seems to be happening in their English classes more generally.

One thing that comes over very quickly in the extract is the extent to which Sirena, in particular, is directionless in her classes. There are no obvious contours in her classroom life. To her, English lessons are just 'exercises' (l.4), one after the other, in a seemingly never ending sequence, with no memorable highs or lows which she can recall. This impression is heightened by the suggestion that Sirena has no obvious sense of a past, a present or a future in the classes. She cannot recall what she did 'yesterday' (l. 14, the day before, in fact), has only a hazy idea of what they are doing now (l. 4) and no idea at all about what they are going to do next lesson (l. 26). It is also apparent that Sirena has only a very general, unfocused idea of why they do what they do in the classroom ('To learn English!' l. 12) and sees the main purpose as satisfying what the teacher (consistently referred to as 'she') wants. Although Raffa makes only a minimal contribution to the interview (a total of around 10 words), his responses do suggest that he, at least, is more involved than Sirena—he

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remembers what happened last lesson and knows what to expect next lesson. But his telling remark that 'Sometimes we watch videos' (l. 31) also suggests that he finds the rest of the lessons uninspiring, and that he, too, is conforming because that is what is expected of him.

While the absence of a sense of purpose comes over clearly in what Sirena and Raffa say, so too does an indication of where the locus of control lies. From what they say, Sirena and Raffa believe that all decision-making lies in the hands of the teacher. They do things 'because the teacher asked us to do it' (l. 10), because 'She wanted us to write.' (l. 18), and because 'She wanted to test our comprehension' (l. 24). This partly explains why Sirena seems to lack a sense of direction, as referred to above. Sirena appears to live in what post-modernists might call an 'endlessly contemporary' state, a permanent condition in which 'now' never ends, with, as I have said, no sense of a past or future as she processes herself through the seemingly never-ending 'exercises' which she is directed to do.

Sirena's description of the lessons as 'exercises' is also telling in that it suggests that there are probably few opportunities for her to experience her classes as satisfying, where feelings of success and 'can do' are built up. Certainly, the absence of any mention of the content of what they do in the classroom (apart from a passing reference to a text on 'jeans') suggests that there is little that is memorable for Sirena—she can not actually state that they are learning *about* anything. The test that she had evidently forgotten is not, for example, cited in relation to the culmination of work on something, or as a demonstration of some ability that has been developed.

It is difficult to speculate (and this is what this is, speculation) on how issues of self-esteem underpin what Sirena and Raffa say, since, in the extract at least, there is not a lot of data for this. However, it is useful to look back at the lists set out by Fisher (1990) and Covington and Teel (1996) which I discussed earlier. In Sirena, do we have evidence of the *Insulating self* ('Boh!'—I don't know [and don't care much]) and *Blaming others* ('Why did you answer those questions?/I don't know! she wanted to test our comprehension.) The report of the teacher that both Sirena and Raffa were working at a 'satisfactory' level (that is, only one step above an 'unsatisfactory' level) may suggest that she had indeed assumed a kind of defensiveness in her reaction to English classes, if she had once hoped for better outcomes.

While the foregoing analysis is highly speculative and other interpretations are certainly possible, it is nonetheless significant that traces of

the impact of factors such as the locus of control, value and purpose, self-esteem and feelings of success can be found in a relatively short extract. One thing is certain from the interview data—Sirena and Raffa are less than enamoured with their English classes, and the causes for this need to be identified. It is, of course, possible in reality that we are dealing with a vast range of other factors, way beyond the confines of the classroom (family background, economic climate, personality, temporary personal crises, etc.) that may in the end have a much more powerful effect than any localized factors that we can identify. Yet, working as we do within the confines of the classroom, it seems to be the essential professional responsibility of teachers to try to understand why learners may say the things they do from the perspective of our role in this.

So where does this leave us? Reading Sirena and Raffa's interview data, what advice would we offer to their teacher? If my analysis in terms of the locus of control, the absence of a sense of purpose, and a lack of feelings of success and heightened self-esteem are correct, then the literature on motivation would point to a need for the teacher to involve Sirena and Raffa in at least some level of classroom decision-making (see Breen and Littlejohn 2000, for an extensive debate on this), to set out and build consensus towards purposes for doing things (through discussion, planning and evaluation), and the design of tasks which promote a sense of competence and 'can do'. One wonders, for example, if Sirena would have answered differently if her lessons had had some kind of topic coherence over a period of time (such as a coherent theme), so that they were no longer primarily seen as empty 'exercises'. One wonders, too, if she may have recalled when the test was going to take place if she had had some part in deciding when it was going to happen and what it was going to involve. And would she have had a better idea of what they had already done, what they are doing now, and what they are going to do next if she was working within some larger sequence of work that she had had a part in planning?

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