

# STRATEGIES TO MOTIVATE IN THE LANGUAGE CLASSROOM

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**Abstract:** *I have started a research on Applied Linguistics about students' motivation on learning English. My paper is oriented to all those people that want to know how to motivate students, especially if they are (or want to be) teachers of a second or foreign language (L2/FL)*

*As my research is focused on motivation in learning English at the end of primary and secondary school (comparing 6<sup>th</sup> year of Primary School and 4<sup>th</sup> of Secondary School), my paper will be more relevant for people that work with children or young students, although some ideas may be useful for all kinds of language teachers and teachers in general. Nevertheless, they are just motivational strategies. And since a group of students (and each student) is a world, not all these strategies will necessarily be helpful for all students.*

*My paper starts with a small introduction to the subject of motivation (particularly motivation on L2/FL acquisition), followed by a summary of the ways of motivating.*

**Key words:** Motivation, strategies, L2/FL acquisition.

**Resumen:** *He comenzado un proyecto de investigación de Lingüística Aplicada sobre la motivación de los alumnos en el aprendizaje del inglés. Mi comunicación está orientada a todo el mundo que quiera saber cómo motivar a los estudiantes, especialmente si son (o quieren ser) profesores de una segunda lengua o lengua extranjera.*

*Como mi investigación se centra en la motivación en el aprendizaje del inglés al final de primaria y secundaria (comparando 6<sup>o</sup> Primaria y 4<sup>o</sup> ESO), my comunicación será más relevante para gente que trabaje con niños o estudiantes jóvenes, aunque algunas ideas pueden ser útiles para todo tipo de profesores de lengua y profesores en general. Sin embargo, son simplemente estrategias de motivación; y como un grupo de estudiantes (y cada estudiante) es un mundo, no todas estas estrategias servirán para todos los estudiantes.*

*Mi comunicación comienza con una pequeña introducción al tema de la motivación (especialmente motivación en la adquisición de una segunda lengua o lengua extranjera), seguido de un resumen de las formas de motivar.*

**Palabras clave:** Motivación, estrategias, adquisición de segunda lengua o lengua extranjera.

## 1. Introduction

First of all, I would like to point out that the next ideas are taken from Dörnyei (2001). Others come from Allen (1974). However, I am explaining these authors' ideas from my personal point of view.

In order to talk about strategies to motivate, we'd better know what we mean by the concept of motivation. Let's see the definition that appears in the *Longman Dictionary of Applied Linguistics*:

«Motivation n. the factors that determine a person’s desire to do something. In Second Language and Foreign Language learning, learning may be affected differently by different types of motivation. Two types are sometimes distinguished:

- a) Instrumental motivation: wanting to learn a language because it will be useful for certain “instrumental goals”, such as getting a job, reading a foreign newspaper, passing an examination.
- b) Integrative motivation: wanting to learn a language in order to communicate with people of another culture who speak it.

(Further reading: Gardner and Lambert 1972) »

Many authors identify just two main types of motivation in which we could include instrumental and integrative motivation. Those main types are intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. Intrinsic if the motivation comes from within (it is inside the individual) and extrinsic if the impulse of motivation comes from outside. When students do something because they enjoy it (and cannot give another reason for doing it but «I love it», «it is funny» and the like), the drive is intrinsic. And when students give explanations of their behaviour such as: «My parents will buy me a motorbike, if I pass this subject» («Speaking English will be helpful for my career», «English is a compulsory subject», «I would like to travel abroad and English will be useful», and so on.), the motivation is extrinsic.

## 2. Which strategies can teachers use to motivate their students?

After introducing the concept of motivation, I would like to point out that anything can interfere on students’ motivation and affect it; therefore, it is important to know how we can encourage and motivate them. I believe that this paper can be very useful for any teacher, and more concretely for teachers of a Second or Foreign Language (L2/FL)

There are many ways in which we can motivate our students. The attitude of the teacher is crucial. A teacher must encourage their pupils, counsel them and praise them. If the teacher is there to solve their doubts after the lesson, gives them immediate feedback, makes them talk and communicate with their class-mates, transmits their motivation to the students and has a good attitude towards their students and the subject, is much more motivating than the teacher that shows that he/she does not care about the lesson, or about the pupils. Of course, as Gardner (1996) says «you can’t motivate a rock» but our students are receptive and we can awaken their motivation. Nevertheless, we have to bear in mind that each student is a world and not all the strategies will work with all the groups of students we may find.

I would like to include two quotes that Dörnyei already used, the first one from the famous film «Mary Poppins» and the second from Tim Murphey<sup>2</sup>:

«“It’s a game, isn’t it, Mary Poppins?”

“Well, it depends on your point of view. You see, in every job that must be done there is an element of fun. You find the fun and – snap! – the job’s a game. And every task you undertake becomes a piece of cake...”»

«“Mary was a friend I had in college. Without studying much, she always made really good grades. It was a mystery to me. I wondered how she did it, so I began observing her more closely... Some of her classes were not really interesting to her, but still she wanted to learn and to make good grades. So she pretended (and then actually believed) that what the professors were saying was extremely interesting. Then she became excited about telling everybody about it...”»

It seems to me that both quotations are amazing. The first one embodies perfectly what a teacher should do to motivate their students: demonstrate them that there may be fun in every activity they have to do. The last one is more difficult to get because, usually, students will not do it but, may be if we show them the fun of learning a new language, they will finally believe that it is interesting... We have to make them give the step.

In order to make our students give that step, there are several strategies we can follow. First of all, as Dörnyei would say, we have to create the appropriate motivational conditions. The attitude of the teacher is very important. Teachers must demonstrate their own enthusiasm for the contents of the lesson and share it with their students. The students must feel that the teacher really cares about what they are doing and takes their learning very seriously. There must be a good relationship with the students. In relation to this, it is necessary to create a good and pleasant classroom environment. We could try to personalise the classroom according to the students' taste and also make them understand the importance of tolerance (showing them that mistakes and risk-taking are part of learning, for instance). A sense of group is needed, as there must be cooperation and interaction among students. Teenagers tend to feel humiliation and are hurt very easily due to failure. If there is a sense of group, the whole group can help their mates not to feel anxiety or humiliation. If we make them aware of the fact that they are all equal (all of them doing the same activities and all of them committing the same mistakes) the sense of «togetherness» will be a wonderful feeling for them. They will not feel alone and will not worry about what the others may think or say if they fail. The importance they give to their peers is immense.

Once the atmosphere is the adequate, we must originate initial motivation. In an L2 or FL class, we have to increase the learners' L2/FL related values and attitudes. We could invite senior students to talk about their positive experiences or, even easier than that, we can group our students (when not working alone) in a way in which there is always a motivated pupil that can transmit that enthusiasm towards the subject. It is also interesting to make students see the views of their equals by asking different questions to them and making them give their opinions. Raising the students' intrinsic interest in the learning process is a bit difficult but we can always highlight aspects of the subject that the students are likely to enjoy. We must also try to make the first experiences with the language as positive as possible; encouraging them to speak the language, showing them that mistakes are permitted and trying to find topics that can be interesting to them will help them to «give up» shyness and begin communication. They are looking forward to it, they just need a little drive and help from our part. Promoting a positive and open disposition towards the other language, its speakers and their culture is also very helpful. We can make them «explore» the L2/FL community and tell them «amazing» and real stories about the culture of that language community. The idea of «pen-friends» can be fostered, making friends is always something pleasant for them; it could be a good idea to look for other students from the foreign country that would not mind writing to them in the target language (TL). Nowadays, students do not like writing letters very much but we can always make use of the Internet; e-mails or even an international chat can be more motivating to them. We could also propose the whole class to write a letter to a pen-friend; the whole group will be then looking forward to getting their letter answered. In this way, we are encouraging our students to apply their knowledge in real-life situations. We have to remind our students the importance of learning an L2/FL; we must emphasise its usefulness and the advantages they can have if they speak another language. We could also ask students to look for a good web page in the Internet, the only condition is that the page must be written in the L2/FL. Each week, a different student writes on the blackboard the page found and tells the rest of the class what they can find there. There is a lot of useful information on the Web and we should make our students aware of it. In this way, students discover interesting and attractive pages for them and can share them with their mates. (Some of them may have to do with a famous person they like or a piece of news that has seemed striking to the student in question. Others are related with a place they would like to visit or the culture of the speakers of the TL. Some of them even look for pages about Grammar or Phonetics, when they have problems with it)

It is also very important to increase our students' expectancy of success. It is necessary to make sure that they are sufficiently prepared to do the task and that they know exactly what success in the task means. Do not forget to mention any potential problems they may encounter. In that way, students will try to solve those problems and will not think about the difficulty of them. We must also offer assistance and let students help each other. As I have said before, the

sense of group is really crucial and interaction with their peers is vital. Teachers should also draw class goals so as to increase their students' goal-orientation. We can draw attention from time to time to those class goals and how a particular activity helps to achieve them; you can keep those goals attainable by arranging them with the students, if necessary. And also, make them outline their individual goals and show their accomplishment when they fulfil those aims.

Another thing that we must try to do is making the teaching materials attractive for the learners. It is not difficult to know which our students' interests, needs and goals are, and we should include them in our curriculum as much as possible. When we relate the topics to the experiences and environments of the students, it is easier for them to study and enjoy the course. In some cases, we can even tell our students to outline and run the course or a part of it.

It is really important to make our students have realistic learner beliefs. We have to face those erroneous thoughts, expectations or suppositions that the students may have. We should point out that there are many different ways to learn a new language and a number of factors that contribute to its achievement.

Once we have generated that initial motivation, we have to maintain and preserve it. The first thing a teacher should do is to make learning stimulating and pleasant. One thing we can do to make learning more enjoyable is to break the monotony of the lessons. We should change the learning activities and other aspects of teaching as much as possible, even, sporadically doing the unexpected. It is important to focus on the motivational flow from time to time and not only on the information flow. We can also make the class more interesting by personalising tasks and making them more challenging. Assignments are more attractive if we adapt them to the students' interest and if we include original, intriguing, exotic, funny, competitive or fantasy elements. We must raise the curiosity of our students. We can increase our students' involvement too. Creating specific roles and personalised responsibilities for each student is a good way of making them real participants of the development of the lesson. It is also a good thing to do to take part in those games; if we involve ourselves in those activities, our students will not be shy and involve themselves too.

How can teachers present tasks in a motivating way? Firstly, they have to explain the purpose and utility of the exercise by telling what the activity implies and the connections it may have with the students' daily life. Secondly, they have to arouse the desire of the students by projecting enthusiasm and intensity when introducing the activity and even by asking the students to guess and predict about the following activity. Finally, the teacher must also provide appropriate strategies to carry out the task. A teacher should work with the learner at the beginning of difficult tasks, as our minimal assistance can be enough for them to find the right answer and gain confidence to continue with the activity without problem. Students want immediate feedback and satisfaction; teachers should offer a kind of task that takes this idea into account.

I have already said that we, as teachers, should increase the students' goal-orientedness. More specifically, we can encourage learners to select specific, short-term goals for themselves and emphasise goal completion deadlines and offer ongoing feedback. We can draw up written agreement with a student, or a whole group, that specifies what they will learn and how, and the ways in which the teacher will help and reward them. If we follow this strategy, we should observe students' progress and make sure that both participants respect the details of the «contract».

Surely, childhood and adolescence are the most difficult periods in our lives, specially the last one. Teenagers are the most insecure people in the world, although they may hide that insecurity behind a rebellious behaviour. We can help them at those hard ages by protecting their self-esteem and increasing their self-confidence. Many students may begin school with excitement and eagerness but then start to find it anxiety provoking and psychologically threatening. For this reason, we have to provide multiple opportunities of success adjusting the difficulty level of activities to the students' capacities. We should focus on what learners can do and not in what they cannot do. We may also include improvement options and compensate difficult exercises with easy ones not to discourage learners. We can build our learners' self-

confidence by providing regular encouragement and drawing their attention to their strengths and skills. It is convenient to tell students that we believe in their effort to learn and their capacity to realise the exercises. A good teacher should try to remove or, at least, reduce the anxiety-provoking elements in the learning setting. If we want to do this, we have to avoid social comparison (even in its indirect forms) and promote cooperation instead of competition. We have to point out that everybody makes mistakes at the beginning of the learning process and they have to accept it. Another thing that we must remember is to make tests and assessments completely clear by giving sufficient advance information about them (even about the criteria used for marking) and highlighting that they will have plenty of time to complete the whole test. We must not forget either, to offer options to improve the final mark and negotiate final grades with students. It can be very useful to teach students learning strategies to facilitate the intake of new material and also to teach them communication strategies to help them overcome communication difficulties. I have also noticed that many students do not know how to study. I consider that it is important not only to show them strategies to learn (as for example: memorising new words by means of meaningful visual imagery) but also to tell them strategies to study (for instance, making summaries or drawing schemas)

As students are really vulnerable, we have to allow them retain a positive social image by avoiding humiliation, criticism or putting students in the spotlight unexpectedly and also by selecting activities that contain good and positive roles for the participants. If we criticise them in front of their peers, they will forget it with difficulty and it will really hurt them.

I have previously said that cooperation among learners is very important and it may increase students' motivation. We can set up tasks in which teams are asked to work together towards the same goal, always taking into account team products and not individual products in our assessments. We could also provide learners with some training to learn how best to work in a team. On the other hand, we should also promote learners' autonomy by allowing them real choice about as many aspects of the learning process as possible. We have to take into account that we are the teachers and as teachers we can adopt many roles and the best one is that of a facilitator. Our students will not see us as a menace or an enemy but as somebody that is there to help them to learn many interesting things. There must not only be cooperation among students but also between students and teacher.

Another thing we should do to maintain and protect our students' motivation is to increase the students' self-motivating capacity. This may seem the most difficult strategy to put into practice but there are three steps we can follow. First of all, we should raise our students' awareness of the importance of self-motivation and how helpful it can be. Then, we could share with them strategies that we have found useful in the past (for example, giving yourself regular self-reminders to concentrate –such as 'Concentrate! Come on! Just a bit more!'– or focusing on the first steps to take by ignoring the complexity of the activity). Like this they can also learn the strategies that their mates use. Finally, we have to encourage students to adopt, develop and apply self-motivating strategies.

After generating and maintaining our students' motivation, we should also encourage positive self-evaluation. In order to do this, we have to promote effort attributions in our students. That is to say, we have to encourage them to explain their failures by the lack of effort and appropriate strategies applied instead of by their insufficient ability. There are many lazy students who do not want to make an effort and prefer to put the blame on their lack of ability when they do not succeed. We have to demonstrate them that their thoughts are wrong and that they can complete the task with a little bit of effort. We should never forget to pass along to our students any compliments we have heard about them. We have to notice and react to any positive contributions from our students and provide regular feedback about the progress they make and about the areas they should specially concentrate on.

It is easy to increase our students' satisfaction. We have to observe them and comment accomplishments or progresses taking time to celebrate any «victory». We can make students' progress tangible by encouraging the production of visual records and arranging regular events. We could even include tasks that involve the public display of the students' skills.

The last point of this section is offering rewards and grades in a motivating manner. We can offer rewards to our pupils but we must not overuse them. We should make sure that students do not get too preoccupied with them and also that even non-material rewards have some kind of lasting visual representation. We can also offer rewards as unexpected gifts to show our recognition after students have done the activity in question. Finally, use marks in a motivating way, reducing as much as you can their demotivating impact. To do so, the teacher must make the assessment system completely transparent, and include mechanisms by which students and their peers can also express their views. Do not forget that grades should reflect effort and improvement and not only objective levels of achievement. It is better to apply continuous assessment and exams than relying only on pencil-and-paper tests. We can provide various self-evaluation tools to encourage students' self-assessment.

As you can see, there are many ways to arise students' motivation and I think that all of them should be taken into account. We can try several strategies and we must not demoralise if one of them does not work with our students. Each group of students is a «New World» because each student is unique and we have to treat them like that. It is difficult to get to know all our students, especially if they change each year, but at least we should try to treat each of them as a person because they are not a whole. We must also respect them and be an ally, not an enemy. And above all, remember that imposition can «sabotage» motivation.

#### Notes:

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<sup>2</sup> Dörnyei, Z. *Motivational Strategies in the Language Classroom*. Cambridge University Press, 2001. (p. 113) As he cites, the first quote is from the 1964 Disney motion picture «Mary Poppins» and the second from Murphey, T. *Language Hungry: An Introduction to Language Learning Fun and Self-Esteem*. Tokyo: Macmillan Languagehouse, 1998. (P.21)

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