

Motivating Students and Teachers

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Framing the Issue

The word *motivation* derives from the Latin verb *movere*, meaning “to move” (through the intermediary of a late Latin adjective *motivus*, “stirred,” inherited in French as *motif*), and has been introduced as a technical term in psychology to answer the fundamental question of why people think and behave as they do. Accordingly, motivation concerns the direction and magnitude of human behavior, explaining the choice of a particular action, persistence in it, and the effort expended on it. Because human behavior is shaped by a wide variety of factors—ranging from internal reasons such as curiosity or a desire for peace to external motives such as rewards and grades—the notion of motivation is very broad, and we find several competing theories both in the mainstream psychological and the second language literature to describe why people decide to do something, how long they are willing to sustain the activity, and how hard they are going to pursue it (for overviews, see Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011; Dörnyei & Ryan, 2015).

Motivation is a particularly important dimension of sustained learning activities such as mastering a foreign or second language (L2), because it provides the primary impetus to initiate L2 learning and, later on, the driving force to sustain the lengthy and often tedious learning process. Without sufficient motivation, even individuals with the most remarkable abilities cannot accomplish long-term goals; nor are appropriate curricula and good teaching enough to ensure student achievement on their own. The term *motivation* is therefore frequently used by teachers and learners alike, when they speak about language-learning success or failure, and the concept has been the subject of a great deal of research in applied linguistics over the past five decades. It is widely agreed that motivation can be consciously generated and enhanced in language classrooms through the use of appropriate *motivational strategies*, and interested teachers can find detailed summaries of such techniques in the literature (e.g., Dörnyei, 2001; Hadfield & Dörnyei, 2013).

The study of *teacher motivation* has been less prominent than research on the motivational disposition of students, even though the transformation of a classroom into a motivating learning environment has to begin with the teachers,

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because they are the people in the key position to shape classroom life. As evidenced by so many inspiring examples around the world, teachers can become transformational leaders, and the engine of this transformational drive is the teacher's own enthusiasm and desire for change and improvement. The good news about teacher motivation is that it is highly contagious: it has the potential to infect the students and to generate in them an attractive vision of language learning. Therefore, with a bit of exaggeration, we might say that, if a teacher is motivated, his/her class is likely to follow suit. The key question is therefore this: Can motivational skills be consciously developed in teachers, or is a teacher's capacity to motivate and inspire solely the consequence of a natural talent one has to be born with? Extensive past research suggests that, while having a natural flair for teaching and communication is a definite advantage, motivational skills *can* be developed as part of a purposeful training program. And, once such skills are in place, they will have a significant impact on student motivation.

An aspect of classroom motivation that is often overlooked by scholars is that this phenomenon is influenced by the characteristics of the social context and of the *learner group* in particular. When a teacher faces a motivationally challenging classroom situation—for example, general lethargy or lack of interest—it may not be enough to cater for the individual learners' motivational needs as part of the troubleshooting efforts, because the learner group as a whole can have such a powerful influence over its members that it often overrides their personal preferences and commitment. Therefore motivation also needs to be tackled at the group level, which explains the relevance of *group dynamics* to classroom motivation. As we shall see later, an awareness of the principles of group dynamics can make classroom events less threatening to teachers, can help them develop more efficient methods of classroom management, and can thus consciously facilitate the development of cohesive and cooperative group structures that constitute the basic motivational conditions.

Making the Case

One of the main developments in L2 motivation research over the past decade has been an increased focus on language learners' *self-concept* in understanding their motivational dispositions (see, e.g., Csizér & Magid, 2014). This holistic approach is understandable, given that an L2 is more than a mere communication code that can be learned like other academic subjects; knowledge of a language is part of the individual's personal "core," is involved in most mental activities, and forms an important aspect of one's identity. Therefore an adequate theory of language-learning motivation requires a paradigm that approaches motivation from a whole-person perspective. Such a theory was offered by the L2 motivational self system proposed by Dörnyei in 2005 (for a detailed description, see Dörnyei, 2009) as a comprehensive synthesis of past research on the main dimensions of L2 motivation and of psychological theories concerning "possible selves" (Markus & Nurius, 1986; Higgins, 1987). This theory is based on the premise that the way in

which people imagine themselves in the future plays an important role in energizing their learning behavior in the present.

The L2 motivational self system is a tripartite construct: it consists of the ideal L2 self, the ought-to L2 self, and the L2 learning experience. The ideal L2 self—the key concept—is a desirable or ideal self-image that the L2 user would like to be in the future. If people perceive a discrepancy between this ideal and their current state, they may be motivated to learn a new language or to develop their proficiency in an existing one. The ought-to L2 self reflects the attributes that one believes one ought to possess in order to meet expectations (e.g., those of family members or friends) or in order to avoid possible negative outcomes in the process of L2 learning. This self-image may bear little resemblance to one's own desires or wishes, since it involves an "imported" image of the future. The third component, the L2 learning experience, is different from the first two in that it focuses on the learners' real and present, rather than imagined and future, experience and covers a range of situated, "executive" motives related to the immediate learning environment—such as the impact of the teacher, the curriculum, the peer group, and the experience of success. Over the past decade, this tripartite construct has been successfully validated in diverse L2 learning contexts (for a recent review, see Dörnyei & Ryan, 2015), and the converging empirical evidence indicates that future self-guides, and the ideal L2 self in particular, function as potent motivators for L2 learners in a variety of learning environments, irrespective of the learners' age group (from adolescence on) or learning situation (secondary, university, or adult education).

Finally, a key aspect of possible future selves is that they involve *images* and *senses*—people can "see" and "hear" their future self-image. This means that, in many ways, possible selves are similar to dreams and visions about oneself; in Markus and Nurius's (1987, p. 59) words, "Possible selves encompass within their scope visions of desired and undesired end states." Thus future self-guides can be seen as the "vision of what might be"; and, building on this recognition, Dörnyei and Kubanyiova (2014, p. 2) argue that "vision is one of the single most important factors within the domain of language learning: where there is a vision, there is a way."

Pedagogical Implications

As mentioned earlier, there are several collections of practical motivational strategies, and Dörnyei (2014) has divided them into three broad categories, as strategies focusing on the learner's (a) *vision*, (b) *individual learning experience*, and (c) *group experience*.

Motivational strategies focusing on the learner's *future vision* are based on the recognition that, although future self-guides have the capacity to motivate action, this does not always happen automatically; in many cases the desire to learn the L2 that has been generated by constructive future self-images fails to be transformed into actual action. Therefore Dörnyei and Kubanyiova (2014) have designed a six-phase visionary training approach designed to increase the capacity of future self-guides to motivate action effectively:

1. *Creating the vision.* The logical first step in a visionary motivational program is to help learners create desired future selves: that is, construct visions of who they could become as L2 users and of what knowing an L2 could add to their lives.
2. *Strengthening the vision.* The more intense the imagery accompanying the vision, the more powerful the vision; therefore we need to help students see their desired L2 selves with more clarity and, consequently, with more urgency for action.
3. *Substantiating the vision.* Possible selves are only effective inasmuch as learners perceive them as plausible (hence the qualification “possible”); therefore students need to anchor their ideal L2 self-images in a sense of realistic expectations.
4. *Transforming the vision into action.* Vision without action is a daydream; future self-guides are only productive if they are accompanied by a set of concrete action plans: that is, by a blueprint of concrete pathways that will lead to these selves.
5. *Keeping the vision alive.* Everybody has several distinct possible selves that are stored in memory and compete for attention in the person’s limited “working self-concept”; in order to keep our vision alive we need to activate it regularly, so that it does not get squeezed out by other life concerns.
6. *Counterbalancing the vision.* A classic principle in possible selves theory is that, for maximum effectiveness as a motivational resource, a desired future self should be offset by a corresponding “feared self”: that is, a scenario that describes the negative consequences of failure.

Motivational strategies focusing on the *individual learning experience* involve a variety of techniques, the most important ones being whetting the students’ appetite (that is, arousing their curiosity and attention); increasing their expectancy of success; making the teaching materials relevant to them; breaking the monotony by varying as many aspects of the learning process as possible; making the learning tasks interesting and engaging; increasing the learners’ self-confidence by providing regular encouragement and reducing language anxiety; increasing learner satisfaction by celebrating success; and offering grades in a motivational manner (e.g., by making the assessment system transparent, by making sure that grades reflect effort and improvement and not merely objective levels of achievement, and by encouraging accurate student self-assessment).

Motivational strategies focusing on the *group experience* are closely associated with group-building techniques developed within the field of group dynamics. The two areas that concern learners’ motivational state most are *group cohesiveness* and *group norms*. The former refers to the strength of the relationships of group members with one another and with the group itself, the latter to the implicit and explicit rules of conduct in the classroom that regulate the life of the learner group and make joint learning possible. How can we consciously create a cohesive classroom climate with productive group norms? Several procedures have been found to be conducive to the development of a cohesive learning community (for a summary, see Dörnyei & Murphey, 2003)—for example, learning about each other;

creating a variety of opportunities for contact and interaction among students, including through extracurricular activities; cooperation toward common goals; intergroup competition (e.g., games and sport events); and, strangely enough, exposing the group to joint hardships and common threats by making its members carry out some tough physical task or go through some calamity together.

Regarding *group norms*, their motivational role becomes particularly salient when things go wrong, for example when the class develops the “norm of mediocrity.” This refers to peer pressure put on fellow students not to excel academically, on pain of being called names such as “nerd” or “brain.” This practice often results in a dramatic decrease in students’ individual levels of motivation. So, how can we make sure that the norms in our classroom promote rather than hinder learning? The secret of norms is that they are, inherently, *social products*: If we want to introduce a long-lasting and constructive norm, that norm needs to be explicitly discussed and accepted by the group. Similarly, unproductive norms need to be directly addressed and changed through consensus. Such norm-building efforts will not only reduce the frequency of someone’s violating a norm, but when a student breaks a class rule, the group itself will help bring the “culprit” back in line. Classmates can put considerable group pressure on errant members and enforce conformity with the group’s norms.

This brief overview of motivational strategies was intended to offer a glimpse into the wealth of techniques and approaches that language teachers have at their disposal for motivating their learners. Unfortunately, motivational issues do not tend to receive sufficient emphasis in L2 teacher education and, as a consequence, instructors often find themselves in situations where they are expected to meet the challenging demands of classroom management without sufficient awareness and training. This is not unlike sending soldiers to war without sufficient ammunition, which is one reason why the L2 teaching profession is struggling with serious difficulties and these overshadow the satisfaction with the inherent qualities of the job. According to Dörnyei and Ushioda (2011), other factors contributing to the erosion of teacher motivation include growing restrictions on teachers’ autonomy (externally imposed curricula, tests, methods, and other directives), the difficulty of maintaining intellectual challenge in the face of repetitive content and routinized classroom practices, an inadequate career structure to generate effective motivational pathways, and economic conditions, which are usually inferior to those of other service professions with comparable qualifications (e.g., lawyers and doctors).

The often demotivating conditions in which language teachers work underscore Dörnyei and Kubanyiova’s (2014) conclusion that “transforming classrooms into engaging environments for language learning demands more than a repertoire of innovative principles and techniques—it requires teachers who will be motivated to put the knowledge into practice.” Accordingly, igniting—or, if necessary, reigniting—the flame of teacher vision may well be the single most important step in any motivational agenda for classroom practitioners. Because most teachers entered the profession with idealism and a definite sense of commitment, the seeds of any future teaching vision are contained in their past experiences. This being the case, (re)motivating teachers involves a search for identity insofar as it helps them

understand who they are and who they want to become, even as they address the fundamental “whys” of the profession: the values, moral purposes, and teaching philosophies that guide classroom practitioners in their everyday conduct. After all, Hermanson (2009, pp. 10–11) is right when she states: “Whether you are presenting to a large audience or mentoring a youngster, what you are offering is deeper than your words or techniques. What you are offering is your Self.”

SEE ALSO: Administration and Management of Kindergarten to 12th Grade Classroom Environments; Motivational Strategies

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Suggested Readings

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