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Learner motivation and interest

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Abstract

There are a lot of factors which influence success in language learning. However, one of the most important factors is the learner's motivation to learn the language in order to be able to use it in real-life situations. Research and experience show that learners with strong motivation can achieve a lot regardless of circumstances. Studies of motivation in second language learning have led to several distinctions, one of which is the distinction between integrative and instrumental motivation. According to this distinction, some learners are motivated to learn the language because they want to integrate into the target language community, while for others the driving force is their desire to achieve personal goals. Another distinction related to motivation is the distinction between extrinsic motivation, which is regulated from an external source, and intrinsic motivation, which is regulated from within. And according to a third distinction, there can be global, situational and task motivation. Even though teachers cannot control all types and aspects of motivation, they can do a lot to help learners develop motivation and interest for learning the language. This paper discusses the importance of motivation, the different types of motivation and the ways of promoting learner motivation and interest.

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1. Introduction

Motivation is one of the most important factors that influence the success in language learning. Even though research has demonstrated that success in language learning is related to positive attitudes and motivation, it is not easy to define and measure motivation, and the direction of this relationship is not clear, whether motivation leads to successful language learning or the success in language learning increases motivation. Brown (1987: 114) defines motivation as 'an inner drive, impulse, emotion or desire that moves one to a particular action'. Thus, a motivated learner is the learner who wants to achieve a goal and who is willing to invest time and effort in reaching that goal. Brown (ibid.) remarks that all human beings have needs or drives that are more or less innate, but their intensity depends on the environment. Ausubel (1968: 368-379) has identified six needs and desires that are integral parts of motivation: the need for exploration, the need for manipulation, the need for activity, the need for stimulation, the need for knowledge and the need for ego enhancement.

The results of a study on successful language learning (Naiman et al., 1978, cited in Ur, 1991: 275) showed that the most successful learners are not always those who have a natural aptitude for learning, but those who possess

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certain characteristics most of which are clearly associated with motivation. Ur (ibid.) lists the following characteristics:

1. *Positive task orientation*. The learner is willing to tackle tasks and challenges, and has confidence in his or her success.
2. *Ego-involvement*. The learner finds it important to succeed in learning in order to maintain and promote his or her own (positive) self-image.
3. *Need for achievement*. The learner has a need to achieve, to overcome difficulties and succeed in what he or she sets out to do.
4. *High aspirations*. The learner is ambitious, goes for demanding challenges, high proficiency, top grades.
5. *Goal orientation*. The learner is very aware of the goals of learning, or of specific learning activities, and directs his or her efforts towards achieving them.
6. *Perseverance*. The learner consistently invests a high level of effort in learning, and is not discouraged by setbacks or apparent lack of progress.
7. *Tolerance of ambiguity*. The learner is not disturbed or frustrated by situations involving a temporary lack of understanding or confusion; he or she can live with these patiently, in the confidence that understanding will come later.

2. Types of motivation

Studies of motivation in second language learning have led to several distinctions, one of which is the distinction between integrative and instrumental motivation.

2.1. Integrative and instrumental motivation

One of the most influential studies on motivation in second language learning was carried out by Gardner and Lambert (1972). They identified two kinds of attitudes that influence motivation in language learning: attitudes to the target-language speakers and attitudes related to the possible uses of the language being learned. Gardner (1985: 10) maintains that in contrast to motivation, attitudes do not have direct influence on learning: 'Motivation in the present context refers to the combination of effort plus desire to achieve the goal of learning plus favourable attitudes towards learning the language'. The two kinds of attitude correspond to the two kinds of motivation: integrative and instrumental. Gardner et al. (1977: 244) describe these two kinds of motivation as follows:

'Integrative reasons are defined as those which indicate an interest in learning the language in order to meet and communicate with members of the second language community. Instrumental reasons refer to those reasons which stress the pragmatic aspects of learning the second language, without any particular interest in communicating with the second language community.'

Thus, integrative motivation is the learners' desire to integrate themselves into the target-language community and to identify with the culture of the speakers of the target language, while instrumental motivation is the desire to learn the language in order to achieve personal goals such as passing an examination, studying, career advancement, etc.

Brown (2007: 170-171) points out that more appropriate terms would be instrumental and integrative orientation rather than instrumental and integrative motivation because within each orientation the intensity of motivation may vary. According to this view, learner's orientation can be academic or career related (instrumental) and socially or culturally related (integrative). Other studies have failed to find support for the integrative-instrumental construct, which indicates that 'there is no single means of learning a second language: some learners in some contexts are more successful in learning a language if they are integratively oriented, and others in different contexts benefit from an instrumental orientation' (ibid.). The studies have also shown that these two orientations are not mutually exclusive, that is a learner may start studying a language for instrumental purposes and later develop a desire to integrate with the culture and people speaking that language.

2.2. Extrinsic and intrinsic motivation

Another distinction related to motivation is the distinction between extrinsic (externally regulated) and intrinsic (internally regulated) motivation. External motivation is influenced by some kind of external incentive such as money, prize, grades, positive feedback (Brown, 2007: 172), the desire of students to please parents, their wish to succeed in an external exam, peer-group influences (Ur, 1996: 277). Intrinsic motivation, on the other hand, comes from the learners and their attitudes towards the language, their learning aims and goals, their emotions, their ambitions, and so on. Deci (1975: 23) describes intrinsic motivation as follows:

‘Intrinsically motivated activities are ones for which there is not apparent reward except the activity itself. People seem to engage in the activities for their own sake and because they lead to an extrinsic reward. Intrinsically motivated behaviours are aimed at bringing about certain internally rewarding consequences, namely, feelings of competence and self-determination’.

Ushioda (2010) emphasizes that ‘what is crucially important is not whether motivational factors are intrinsic or extrinsic, but whether they are internalized and self-determined, or externally imposed and regulated by others’.

Both types of motivation are important for the success in language learning, and as Ur (1996: 276 - 279) points out, both are at least partially accessible to teacher influence. She mentions several sources of extrinsic motivation that are affected by teacher actions:

1. *Success and its rewards.* Learners who have been successful in past tasks are more likely to engage actively in future tasks and have greater confidence in their ability to learn the language. The teacher’s task is to make sure that learners are aware of their own success as well as to help them develop an ability to recognize success on their own.
2. *Failure and its penalties.* Learners should be aware that they are failing if they are not making satisfactory progress, but they should also know that occasional failures are normal in any learning experience and they should not be ashamed of them but learn from them and use them constructively in order to succeed next time.
3. *Authoritative demands.* Learners may be motivated to work harder under the teacher’s pressure, especially the younger ones, but teachers should try to find a balance because too much authoritative demands by the teacher will make learners dependent on the teacher and will not allow them to develop personal responsibility for their learning, while too much freedom and autonomy may lead to lowering of effort and achievement and learner dissatisfaction.
4. *Tests.* If they are not used too often, tests may be motivating for learners because when they know that they are going to be tested they will invest more time and effort to learn the material than when they are simply told to learn it.
5. *Competition.* Learners are often motivated to do their best when they take part in a competition. However, teachers need to be aware that individual competition can be stressful for people who find losing humiliating and so should opt for group competitions because they tend to be more enjoyable, less tense and equally motivating.

Although intrinsic motivation comes from within and thus is internally motivated, teachers can also influence this type of motivation by ‘developing a relationship with learners, building learners’ self-confidence and autonomy, personalizing the learning process, and increasing learners’ goal-orientation’ (Brown, 2007: 174).

2.3. Global, situational and task motivation

A third distinction concerning motivation has been made by Brown (1987: 115) who identifies three types of motivation:

1. *Global motivation*, which refers to the general orientation of the learners to the goals of learning the foreign language;
2. *Situational motivation*, which depends on the situation in which the learning takes place (classroom learning, naturalistic learning);

3. *Task motivation*, which is the motivation of the learner to do a particular task.

Brown explains that learning a foreign language requires some of all three types of motivation. For example, a learner may have high global motivation to learn the foreign language, but low task motivation for doing a certain activity. While the second motivation does not depend on the teacher, the first and especially the third motivation is where teachers can have an influence and help learners develop, maintain and enhance their motivation by discussing the benefits of learning the foreign language and by designing and using tasks and activities that are interesting, engaging and enjoyable for learners.

3. Promoting learners' motivation

All the learners in the classroom do not have the same type and level of motivation. Some learners may have a very strong motivation to learn the language, others may have a weaker motivation, and yet others may have no motivation at all. However, motivation is not static and it can change in both directions. As motivation is essential in language learning, one of the tasks of the teacher is to awaken, sustain and strengthen learner's motivation. Harmer (2001: 53-54) suggests three areas where teacher's behaviour can influence learners' motivation:

- *Goals and goal setting.* Learners who set goals and expectations for language learning are likely to be motivated to achieve those goals. Teachers can help learners sustain their motivation for achieving their long-term goals by focusing on short-term goals as they can be attained in a shorter time, so that learners can see the results which will motivate them to continue to work hard in order to achieve their long-term goals.
- *Learning environment.* The physical appearance and the emotional atmosphere of the lesson are very important for learners' motivation. Teachers can do a lot about both aspects by decorating the classroom with visual materials, using music, or moving the furniture if necessary, as well as by 'building positive relationship with the learners, creating a supportive and cooperative environment and being careful when responding to learners, especially when giving feedback and corrections'.
- *Interesting classes.* One way of increasing learners' motivation to learn the language is by using a variety of interesting topics and activities in order to keep learners engaged and interested in what they are doing in the classroom.

Ur (1996: 280) points out that 'it is in the arousing of interest, perhaps, that teachers invest most effort, and get most immediate and noticeable pay-off in terms of learner motivation'. She lists several ways of arousing learner interest in the tasks and activities in the classroom:

- Setting clear tasks goals.
- Using varied topics and tasks.
- Using visuals.
- Incorporating tension and challenge by using game-like activities.
- Providing entertainment in the form of jokes, stories, dramatic presentations, movies, video clips, television documentaries, etc.
- Using rope-play and simulations.
- Using information gap activities.
- Personalizing tasks and activities.
- Using tasks and activities with open-ended cues.

Since classroom activities may have a considerable influence on learners' motivation and since it is the teacher who plans, designs and organizes them, it is worth investing time and effort in preparing these activities in order to make them interesting and motivational for learners. However, teachers should be aware that learners of different ages have different types of motivation, so that they cannot use the same methods with all groups of learners. Harmer (1991: 7-8) describes the characteristics of the learners of different ages and different levels and suggests ways of approaching them. For example, because children are curious and have a short span of attention and concentration they need frequent changes of activities which should be exciting and which stimulate their curiosity.

They greatly depend on the teacher's attitude and behavior and often seek teacher approval, so they need to be appreciated by the teacher. Adolescents, on the other hand, value more the approval of their peers rather than the teacher, and they need to be seen in a good light by their peers, so teachers need to be careful not to criticize or humiliate them as it will lead to de-motivation and dissatisfaction. Unlike children, they are not inspired by mere curiosity, so they need challenging activities that will involve them and make them eager to accomplish them. Adult learners are usually highly motivated, they perceive and achieve learning goals easily, and they need realistic challenges and positive teacher attitude.

4. Conclusion

There are a lot of factors which influence the success in language learning. However, one of the most important factors is learners' motivation to learn the language. Research and experience show that learners with strong motivation can achieve a lot regardless of circumstances. Whether the motivation comes from within or from an outside source, whether it is instrumental or integrative, these students have set themselves long-term goals and they are determined to achieve them in any way possible. These students are the easiest to teach, and the teacher's task is to help them sustain and even enhance the motivation they already have.

However, not all learners come with strong motivation and clearly set goals. It may stem from their previous learning experiences, from the attitudes of their parents, peers and other members of the society they live in, the attitudes to the target language and the target-language community and culture, etc. The teacher's attitude and behaviour are very important for these learners. Even though teachers cannot control all aspects of motivation, they can do a lot to help these learners develop motivation for learning the language by creating a positive atmosphere in the classroom and a positive attitude towards the target language and its speakers, by using varied and interesting activities and forms of work in the classroom, by setting short-term goals that are not too difficult for learners to achieve, by building positive rapport with the learners, by treating the learners with respect, care, fairness and understanding and by creating conditions for success and feeling of achievement.

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