



## The Teaching of Foreign Languages – How can Teachers Motivate their Learners?

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### Abstract

*Recent studies show that, notwithstanding all efforts being done by education authorities, schools, individuals across most European countries, the number of students studying foreign languages is waning. Such a sad situation makes leading scholars and experts in this field think about the reasons why. Although they are not always in agreement on all issues involved, there is one common factor on which they all agree – that motivation is a key factor in foreign language learning. There can be different forms of student motivation, namely that which is duty bound, motivation as a result of need, and motivation that comes as a result of enjoyment. There are also various aspects in teaching that can lead to motivation in class. Variety of teaching materials and methods, originality, novelty, challenging activities, types of input presented in class, are just a few of them. The scope of this paper is to analyse deeply all these factors and aspects associated to motivation and how these can be adapted to the foreign language class. Another very important aspect is teacher self-motivation and how teachers of foreign languages are to choose and present the linguistic and/or cultural input in class in a pleasant and innovative way.*

*Keywords: Motivation, foreign language teaching, input*

Over the years, the concept and philosophy of teaching has changed drastically. In today's world, the role (or rather various roles) and duties of any teacher, not least the language teacher, have become not simply complex but, above all, very demanding. Whoever works in schools today feels a certain amount of annoyance and discomfort as a result of the great challenges that have to be faced in class when it comes to motivate the students, maintain discipline and create/stimulate adequate learning programmes. Among these is the fact that most students find learning grammar and vocabulary quite hard – especially in those classes where grammar is given too much weight – and that languages, as taught in schools, are not considered as useful and relevant in life as other subjects, especially in situations where teachers insist on correct but essentially unused grammatical constructions. To make matters worse, after a number of years studying a foreign language, many students feel that they are not progressing in language acquisition and proficiency and consequently feel discouraged and demotivated.

One of the key predictors of success in foreign language teaching and learning is, without doubt, motivation and the biggest challenge for a language teacher is how to increase and sustain learners' motivation in class. In fact practitioners in language classrooms very often feel concerned and challenged by the level of learners' motivation (Cheng & Dörnyei, 2007 [1]; Scheidecker & Freeman, 1999 [2]). Dörnyei, (2001) [3] describes motivation as an abstract construct that has been defined in a number of ways. Dörnyei and Ottó (1998) [4] define motivation in second language (L2) learning as "the dynamically changing cumulative arousal in a person that initiates, directs, coordinates, amplifies, terminates, and evaluates the cognitive and motor processes whereby initial wishes and desires are selected, prioritised, operationalised and (successfully or unsuccessfully) acted out" (p. 65), capturing various influential factors that drive learners' desire or arousal to acquire a foreign language. Research also suggests that motivation can influence language learning outcomes independently from language aptitude (Wigfield & Wentzel, 2007).

Motivating students in class requires a large amount of reflection and action. In fact it is one of the most difficult aspects of teaching but, at the same time, also one of the most important. Students who are not motivated will not learn effectively. They won't retain information, they won't participate and some of them may even become disruptive. Motivation fluctuates, and the greatest challenge is how to keep language learners' motivation at a high level all the time in classes made up of learners who all have different interests and expectations. And it is exactly for this reason that very often it is in the

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details of the everyday running of the class that teachers need to work hard on to motivate their students.

From the students' point of view, there can exist various types of motivation that can lead to learning, namely intrinsic and extrinsic, the former referring to learning that occurs when the student is inspired and already has an interest in learning the subject, whereas the latter occurs when students are driven by other factors like rewards or recognition. There may be other forms of motivation like, for example, motivation driven by need. This occurs when students know that they need to learn a particular foreign language if they want to follow, for instance, a particular university course or career path. Another very effective source of motivation is fun. The more students enjoy themselves in class, the more they will be willing to actively participate and consequently the more they learn. And for lessons to be fun, there are some essential aspects that can play a pivotal role. These include "learning" of notions that are practical and relevant to the students' needs.

Another important aspect is variety, both in the way lessons are presented and delivered as well as in content. It is of fundamental importance not simply to find ways to make the teaching/learning material fun and exciting for our students, but we need to facilitate student activities that give insight to their interests, backgrounds and future goals. Students in class need to become active participants of the learning process and not passive receivers of the teaching process. For this to happen, an "active" teaching/learning approach has to be adopted in class. There are various ways of doing this. Cooperative learning, problem solving activities, class and group projects, decision making tasks, picture interpretation, information gap activities are just a few examples of how students can be actively engaged in a foreign language classroom. Linked to this are two other very important aspects, namely novelty and challenge. Teachers must incessantly surprise their students in class with innovative and original ways of introducing, developing and concluding lessons, which should always include some form of intellectual and, at times, even physical challenge. If students in class are allowed to do the bare minimum, most won't seek to push themselves on their own. Students like to be challenged and will work to achieve high expectations so long as they believe those goals to be within their reach. One must be careful here not to exaggerate, for, if the challenge offered in class is considered by the students to be above their capabilities, it will lead to demotivation and renunciation. A sense of accomplishment is vital in motivating students. Students who feel a sense of accomplishment in class will be better able to direct their own studies and learning outcomes. It is important that when students seem to be struggling or in difficulty they should be given positive feedback and reinforcement as this increases students' self-confidence, competence, and self-esteem. It is very important for teachers to point out the good aspects of the students' work and to provide a clear explanation of their inaccuracies as very often students value the teacher's appreciation of their efforts.

Another very important motivational aspect in foreign language teaching is linked to the linguistic input and teaching material presented in class. When it comes to determining what type of content to present in class and the material to use to help the learner grasp the linguistic concepts is no easy task. First of all, the teacher must ensure that all materials presented in class are comprehensible to the students and adequate to their needs, levels of attainment and age. According to Lightbrown & Spada (2006)[6] teachers can make a positive contribution to students' motivation to learn if classrooms are places that students enjoy coming to because the content is interesting and relevant to their age and level of ability. Very long texts are to be avoided (obviously depending on the age of the learners and their linguistic levels) for the simple reason that the longer the text, the more explanations are required from the teacher's side with the consequence of running the risk of transforming the lesson into a teacher centred one. The chosen topics and the types of medium used should appeal to the students' interests and are to be varied in nature, be it songs, films or videos, web sites, as these can help students not only broaden their perspective on their language acquisition process but it also helps them connect the learning process to their everyday life. Students in class must be involved on a personal level and engaged with their emotions, feelings and needs. One way of doing this is by moving away from the text book and making use of authentic materials, even asking the students themselves to provide such materials in class in such a way as to make them feel they own the lesson. Another way of doing it is by making use of today's high-tech learning environment, moving away from traditional teaching methods. The more we manage to relate the students' foreign language classroom experience to their outside interests and activities, the easier it becomes for them to develop language skills in a natural and relaxed atmosphere. For this reason all efforts should be



made in class to use computer-assisted language learning as this will automatically be linked to playing computer games which in turn are associated with fun, or to computer programs that the students are interested in using.

## Conclusion

Having said all this, one cannot underestimate one other crucial factor that is central to increasing student motivation in the foreign language classroom, self-motivation on the teacher's part. The attitude, charisma, professional preparedness and ongoing professional development and training, availability to students, are all determining factors that can help motivate students in class. It is a known secret that interpersonal relationships between teachers and students and students' perceptions of teachers' behaviour in the classroom are important determinants for students' motivation and engagement (Bieg, Backes & Mittag, 2011)[7]. Furthermore, teacher self-motivation is very central in energizing the teacher to teach and in empowering students to become active participants in the learning process. Indeed, a highly motivated and enthusiastic teacher in class is perhaps the most powerful and influential tool in motivating students. The teachers' projection of enthusiasm, a strong interest in the subject matter and the amount of effort exerted in teaching, definitely have a very strong impact on the students' motivational dispositions.

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