Telling ELT Tales out of School

Keeping the vision alive: Maintaining motivation and promoting effective learning[†]

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Abstract

In this article, I'd like to consider two key factors which affect motivation: **expectancy of success** and the **value** attached to success. I suggest that if the connection between classroom activities and an overall language learning goal is evident, then learners will be more likely to value and hence be motivated in a lesson. They will be able to answer the question 'Why am I doing this?' With value ascribed to classroom activities, it will also be easier for learners to experience success on a more regular basis, a key to both increasing motivation and promoting effective learning.

1. Value

The value an adult language learner attaches to a course depends upon the circumstances under which they are studying. If their aspirations concern, say, passing a university degree in which a language course is a component, then tapping into this kind of extrinsic motivation might prove difficult, in the first instance. Perhaps a more promising approach would be to tap into learners' natural desire to communicate. We live in a world in which communication between people in different places is facilitated by technology, educational and professional mobility is a reality, and many language learners envision themselves being able to use the language in various 'real' situations.

It goes without saying that the greater the apparent relationship between a language course and an adult learner's goals, the greater the value attached to the course. So, what type of course will suit learners who are aiming to be effective users of a language? From my teaching experiences, learners whose aim is to use language in the real world will be motivated by a course which reflects an 'action-oriented approach' to language and learning as described in the Common European Framework of Reference (2001). Such a course not only deals with the nuts and

bolts of the language of study, the grammar, vocabulary and so on, but also offers learners opportunities to draw on what they know and to have a go at carrying out real world communicative tasks. The main thrust will be on *doing* rather than *knowing*.

Even though most language courses are designed for learners whose goals are to be able to use the language, sometimes the connection between the overall communicative goal and elements of a course is tenuous. Learners might have worked through a series of levels and had the various uses of the present perfect explained to them. Quite possibly, though, they won't have had the opportunity to try out using the language in related communicative tasks. In other words, the theory is there, but the 'action' might be missing. If we can frame a lesson with an action-oriented task, the lesson will accrue perceived value in its own right, learners will see that focus of their attention has real-world significance and this will help maintain motivation throughout a course.

Imagine that the lesson you are teaching focuses on quantifiers and the vocabulary of food. Could you frame your lesson with a communicative task so learners are made immediately aware of a practical purpose to which the language could be put? You might be able to ascribe an action-oriented focus at the beginning of the class, for example, ordering food in a café, explaining how to cook something or talking about their eating habits, and present this to learners as an overall objective for the lesson itself.

On a note of caution, however, once we ascribe an action-oriented focus to a lesson, we will need to check that, for the main part, the language and skills work that follows is part of the main story-line. In other words, if their value is to be evident, language and skills work should be integral - within the overall flow of the lesson and connected to the overall practical objective.

2. Success-expectancy

By identifying an appropriate lesson objective, or short-term goal, we are creating a vehicle by which learners can more easily judge the usefulness of the task in relation to their future, long-term goal. This not only prevents them from losing sight of what they are doing and why, it helps them feel that the overwhelming task of language learning is manageable. It also allows them to recognise their achievements and become more aware of their gradual progress. As Dörnyei (1998) points out, 'goal-setting theory is compatible with expectancy-value theories in that commitment is seen to be enhanced when people believe that achieving the goal is possible (cf. expectancy) and important (cf. tasks)'. Short-term goals play a pivotal role in cultivating success-expectancy, the second of our key motivational factors.

To generate success-expectancy, we need to do more than simply present a series of tasks on which learners are bound to do well. There needs to be an appropriate element of challenge in place for them to perceive they are making progress and so moving nearer to their overall goal. Assuming the difficulty level of a task is appropriate, we will be in a position to provide learners with the strategies and the tools they need to succeed. These might include helping learners employ an appropriate strategy when dealing with a listening or reading task with a particular purpose in mind, or teaching them how to overcome difficulties in communicative situations, for example, by asking for clarification or repetition. This not only mirrors an action-oriented approach, but also generates confidence by enabling learners to overcome difficulties. This, in turn, helps them attain their goals and provides a higher sense of self-efficacy. 'The greater the perceived likelihood of goal-attainment and the greater the incentive value of the goal, the higher the degree of the individual's positive motivation' (Dörnyei, 1998). In other words, learners who are able to employ appropriate strategies in a range of situations will be more effective learners.

An individual's success-expectancy will be influenced by their past learning experiences (attribution theory), along with their perception of their own abilities (self-efficacy theory) and a desire to maintain their own self esteem (self-worth theory). Weiner (1979) points out that if our past learning experiences have led us to believe that we have a low ability, and that we believe that this is uncontrollable, we will be unlikely to expect to succeed. If our teaching is to be success-oriented and learning effective, we need to show that ability is not fixed, and the efforts a learner exerts will make a difference to their performance. Telling them why they did well on a task, and what they might need to do in order to improve will help them focus on perceptions of their own abilities and remove the likelihood that they see difficult tasks as personal threats to be avoided.

3. Feedback

If learners 'have a go' at a communicative task, let's say, explaining how to cook something, we can provide them with informative feedback. We could, for example, comment on the content of their explanation (whether there was sufficient information for a person wanting to cook the dish to be able to do so); coherence (whether the

explanation contained sequencing words like *first, then* etc.); and, say, vocabulary (whether 'cooking verbs' were used appropriately). The criteria we select for feedback should be traceable to lesson activities and could be given to learners at the beginning of a task. Feedback needs to be informative and positively oriented, focussing of what an individual 'can do' in order to protect an individual's self-esteem.

In the first instance, teacher feedback on the extent to which a learner has achieved an objective is of crucial significance if success-expectancy is to be maintained and effective learning is to continue. Williams and Burden (1997) point out, however, that we need to exercise caution and be aware of the dangers of an over-reliance on hollow praise. Instead, we need to provide feedback which enables learners to 'identify specific aspects of their performance that are acceptable and capable of improvement by some specified means, it should be both helpful and motivating to them to move into the zone of next development'. Informative feedback can drive effective learning.

4. Mastery orientation

Informative feedback also helps a learner develop a mastery rather than performance orientation towards learning (Ames, 1992). Learners with a performance-oriented approach tend to be more concerned with grades or marks rather than the learning process. On the other hand, mastery oriented learners display an intrinsic interest in learning activities and a positive attitude towards learning. Armed with informative feedback, a learner is encouraged and empowered to develop an innate interest in learning (Deci, 1985). The giving of informative feedback might also act as a vehicle to engage learners who might not initially ascribe value to language learning, say a university student studying language as a compulsory component of their subject-specific degree.

To further engage an individual with the learning process we can encourage them to reflect on their performance and self-assess, also from a 'can do' perspective. As learners become accustomed to reflecting on their performance they will be more able to make the link between their own learning experiences and progress they are making. Armed with the knowledge of the efforts they have made, informative feedback from a teacher, their own assessment of how they have performed a task, and the relevance of the task in relation to their own overall learning goals, learners will be better placed to start to set their own learning goals and hence generate motivation and drive effective learning further.

5. Conclusion

According to Atkinson & Raynor (1974), our decision to do something is influenced by a force which is the product of the **value** attached to the goal and **success expectancy**, and these have been the most researched factors in the area of motivation. When one or the other is zero, there is no motivation to perform an action. In this article, I have considered motivation to be a 'process whereby a certain amount of instigation force arises, initiates action, and persists as long as no other force comes into play to weaken it and thereby terminate action, until the planned outcome has been reached' (Dörnyei, 1998).

Our learners will value and be more attentive to what happens in the classroom if they can perceive the link between a short-term lesson goal and their long-term goal. With a relevant short- term goal in place, we keep a learner's vision alive, increase success-expectancy and encourage learners to use appropriate strategies to complete a task. We can then offer informative feedback, acknowledging progress and providing pointers to future action for further improvement. In this way, we encourage learners to persist by actively engaging them in the learning process, we provide them with the means to further success and we drive intrinsic motivation and effective learning. When we consider how we might realise value and success expectancy in the language classroom, it becomes apparent that the whole might be bigger than the sum of the parts.

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