A Preliminary Exploration of Motivation in EFL Setting

Juan Liu

International Education College, Wuchang Institute of Technology, Wuhan, 430065, China

Abstract

Whatever people do, they need a good reason to persuade them into doing so, and it is the same case with language study, which is known as motivation. Lack of motivation is perhaps the biggest obstacle faced by teachers in their teaching process. Behavioral problems in the classroom often, or always, seem to be linked to the lack of motivation. Therefore, how to motivate students in their English study is worth our great attention and more intensive exploration. In this article, factors effecting the development of students' motivation and approaches to put motivation into better use will be mentioned with a view to aiding learners to make greater improvements.

Keywords

Language learning; Motivation; Factors; Approaches.

1. Introduction

Speaking of motivation, we are supposed to be clear that it is the driving force which helps cause people to achieve goals. In this sense, motivation provides people with the initiative to do everything since people need a reason to be convinced that whatever they do is meaningful to them.

Motivation is said to be categorized into two types: intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. Intrinsic motivation refers to motivation that is driven by an interest or enjoyment in the task itself, and exists within the individual rather than relying on any external pressure. It is usually associated with high educational achievement and enjoyment by students. While extrinsic motivation comes from outside of the individual. Common extrinsic motivations are rewards like money and grades, coercion and threat of punishment. Competition is general extrinsic because it encourages the performer to win and beat others, not to enjoy the intrinsic rewards of the activity. A crowd cheering on the individual and trophies are also extrinsic incentives.

Before we come to the exploration of motivation, we should bear one thing in mind what kind of theory is taking effect behind motivation factor. Hence Maslow's hierarchy of needs, which is one of the most widely discussed theories of motivation. This theory can be summarized as follows:

Human beings have wants and desires which influence their behavior. Only unsatisfied needs influence behavior, satisfied needs do not; Since needs are many, they are arranged in order of importance, from the basic to the complex; The person advances to the next level of needs only after the lower lever need is at least minimally satisfied. The needs, we have just referred to, listed form basic (lowest-earliest) to most complex (highest-latest) are Physiology (hunger, thirst, sleep), Safety/Security/Shelter/Health, Belongingness/Love/Friendship and Self-actualization.

Under the guidance of this theory, we get to know that students should satisfy certain kinds of needs even in language learning, either the praise of teachers or a sense of success for their own sake or whatever. Thus, in order to recognize what kind of need can enable students to be highly motivated in language learning process when satisfied, we are supposed to examine the main factors that can influence students' motivation to the uttermost.

According to Hussin, Maarof, and D'Cruz, "positive self-concept, high self-esteem, positive attitude, clear understanding of the goals for language learning, continuous active participation in the language learning process, the relevance of conductive environment that could contribute to the success of language learning" (2001). They state that six factors influence motivation in language learning: attitudes, beliefs about self, goals, involvement, environmental support, and personal attributes (2001).

Through observing students' behavior in the classroom, three main factors can be perceived to affect their motivation to a large extent: self-confidence, experiencing success and satisfaction, and good teacher-learner relationships as well as relationships between learners.

Self-confidence is the most significant in language-learning. Whatever people do, faith in themselves is the key to success. Students can gain great encouragement, be more energetic and positive in learning a language with it. As Atsuta put it, "At the heart of all learning is a person's belief in his or her ability to accomplish the task" (Atsuta, 2003). Lack of confidence will prevent students from learning the language very actively. Moreover, once self-confidence gained, it will expand to the sense of success both of which can help students achieve still higher goals.

Following self-confidence, experience of success and satisfaction comes in the second position, which provides students with more power to progress. When they can express themselves freely, complete a challengeable task through the target language, or even know something that their peers have no idea of, they are bound to derive a sense of success or satisfaction from it, which, in turn, can be of great help for them to step forward. During this process, students can make improvement consciously or unconsciously. Subrahmanian suggests that external praise for one's improvement is strongly related to fomenting the sense of success (2001). And this just inspires us to consider how to assist students to acquire this sense of success and satisfaction which will be referred to later.

Another crucial factor is good relationship either among learners or between teacher and students. Good relationships between teacher and students can smooth the teaching-learning process with the absence of students' rebellious behavior which is very likely to be obstacles on their way to success. Under such good condition, students' needs to be cared are met, thus, they are willing to follow their teachers. In the same fashion, if they can develop good relations with their peers, there must be cooperation which aids them to learn from each other. Collaborative learning activity, with good peer relationship enables them to make joint effort to achieve the goal. If they make it, they will set still higher goal to step forward; if not, they can cooperate one another to find the effective way to work the problem out.

 From above, we can see, there exists intimate relationship between these main factors and the need theory on which motivation based. Self-confidence, together with good relationship between students and teacher and among peer students as well, will assist them to gain a sense of success in their process of learning a language, which answers for their various needs such as friendship, self-esteem, and self-actualization, etc. Students' basic needs being satisfied, they are willing to, even volunteer to further their study in this manner.

Combined the need theory with these main factors, we come to explore how to motivate students more efficiently from two perspectives: intrinsic and extrinsic.

2. Methods of Motivating Students Intrinsically

When it comes to intrinsic motivation in language learning, some believe that it is not that easy to arouse students' intrinsic attention. As a matter of fact, there's still something we can do to achieve that aim.

As the purpose of intrinsic motivation is to explore learners' potential in language learning for their better performances, we can make great efforts to interest students by making the language itself more "mysterious" and "attractive".

Language can never be separated from its cultural background. While learning a certain foreign language, we cannot avoid its culture, which seems to be more interesting. We consider it as learning language for its own sake. Thus, when teaching the language, we should keep in mind that culture stories behind the language like idioms, proverbs, are supposed to be introduced if necessary.

What's more, related movies, songs, novels can also be infiltrated in the process of language teaching. In this way, students will no longer take English learning as burden. Attracted by these, they are willing to know more. Language learning is just like expedition for something they don't know. As they make it finally, they are bound to feel a sense of success, thanks to which, they can go still further. This is in response to their need of achievement, as a result of which, their confidence will be built up. Put together, students' intrinsic motivation is going to be developed.

As to students' self-esteem in the intrinsic aspect, teachers can be good models for them. The real example of their teacher's success in language learning this way is, of course, a great encouragement, or a good reason for them to continue.

For example, in classroom teaching, the writer as a teacher organized a class activity of "one proverb each day". The divided groups are assigned to give their fellow students a proverb or idiom whenever they have English class, all of them are required to memorize what they are given as much as possible. Although the original purpose of doing so is for self-accumulation, once in a while, they did feel some expressions are of interest and they would try to use them in their writing.

Another simple case in point is that sometimes slang words will be brought in when students are learning new vocabularies or doing some exercises. As these slang words approximate their daily conversation, they can use them at ease to express their meanings when they need to. They will be under such kind of impression that language study is not that boring and difficult as they supposed before. Here comes the realization of their need of self-actualization.

Another important aspect of improving the intrinsic motivation of students is to be a caring teacher. Although guidelines and rules must be set and understood by the students, and if they cross the guidelines a punishment will follow, the teacher must be approachable and understanding (Harris). Students must feel the teacher is genuine and supportive, and the students' values and opinions will be respected. (Lumsden).

Teachers must be kind and listen fairly to the students, and be patient when they don't understand. While they have difficulty in figuring out what the teacher is saying in the class, they feel nervous and even frustrated. Tough criticism will make them feel more upset and unwilling to keep on studying. On the contrary, if the teacher sees potential in all students, and communicate this well to the students, they will in return build a desire to learn and participate. When the students realize that you are not going to get angry, you are being nice and considerate, and the reason you are trying so hard is because it is important to you that your students learn and do well, they will do something nice in return.

3. Methods of Motivating Students Extrinsically

If there's little we can do to cope with students' intrinsic motivation, then their extrinsic motivation leaves enough room for our teachers. From we've already referred to before, we realize that the factors of experiencing success and satisfaction and good teacher-learner relationship as well as the relationship among learners are liable to have much to do with

students' extrinsic motivation, which inspires us to facilitate their learning through the external force.

Intertwined with the sense of success from the intrinsic perspective that success comes from self-improvement, experiencing success and satisfaction can also be realized by way of comparing themselves to the peers in collaborative study.

Cooperation in language study is effective in that learners can get what they lack from their partners, meanwhile, there will be affirmative competition in their subconscious mind to prove their language ability. During this procedure, if they're able to show their outstanding ability, they will be highly motivated in the later days. Thus, competition both among team members and between different groups is becoming necessary. For the group who lose, they are motivated to be the winner next time; while for the group who win, they are eager to do much better. Driven by this extrinsic motivation, it is impossible for them to lead to nowhere.

Following this path, we come to another aspect of extrinsic motivation influenced by relationship. And students' relationship with their language teachers should come in the first place. Most students once had such kind of experience—they are excited and cheerful once they are praised; sometimes they are depressed because their teacher turns a blind eye to their existence or their language ability; thus, what kind of relationship will be formed is, to a great degree, decided by students' impression of their teachers and what they have done to them. Language teachers should realize that some of students appear to be rebellious just trying to attract their teacher's attention. The relationship between students and their teacher will be very sensitive and tender, and side effect occurs if not handled properly. Suppose it is successfully dealt with, students can be highly motivated in a harmonious learning interaction.

Referring to relationship, another indispensable part is students' relationship with their partners, or rather with their peers in the classroom. In a harmonious learning environment, students are positively motivated to do better; if the atmosphere is not good, they can be picky and focus their attention on challenging their peers with the ignorance of their self-improvement.

Enlightened by this, we get to know that teachers ought to be careful in giving their comments on what students have done criticism in particular. This is where the art of language comes. Whenever students hold different opinions, how to make impartial judgments with nobody being hurt really matters. In dividing groups for collaborative study, various language proficiency levels should be taken into account for the equal distribution of students.

At times, students' personal affairs with their classmates will affect their performances in the class. How to lead them to get rid of such influence ought to be carefully considered. Teacher's intervention can be helpful for the establishment of good relationship among students.

Motivation is vital in language learning. Developed and explored properly, it makes language learners positive about their own learning and also creates the drive in them to acquire the targeted language, enjoy the learning process and experience real communication. However, motivation is nonintellectual factor and can be influenced by various things such as environment, personal feelings, all of which can be easily out of our control. Despite all these external forces, there's still something we can do to assist students to be motivated in language study to a large extent. Joint-efforts by students and teachers are in badly need; meanwhile, even further research on motivation should be given due attention to.

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