

How to motivate students through the use of activities

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Abstract

Textbooks can be one of the most demotivating aspects for the students due to the type of topics and activities presented. The introduction of different materials in the dynamics of the classroom can increase our students' motivation. We, as teachers need to take into account our students' preferences and needs in order to create the appropriate resources. The main objective of this study is to show how negotiation of tasks and topics can help our students learn and enjoy English at the same time.

Key words: motivation, task negotiation, textbook, participation.

Resumen

Los libros de texto pueden ser uno de los aspectos que más desmotiven a los alumnos debido a los temas y actividades que presentan. La introducción de diferentes materiales en la dinámica de la clase puede aumentar la motivación de nuestros alumnos. Como profesores necesitamos tener en cuenta los intereses y las necesidades de nuestros alumnos para crear los recursos apropiados. El objetivo principal de este estudio es mostrar cómo la negociación de las actividades y de los temas que se van a tratar puede ayudar a que nuestros alumnos aprendan y disfruten del inglés al mismo tiempo.

Palabras clave: motivación, negociación de tareas, libro de texto, participación.

Initial Reflection

I teach in a public school in Moratalaz (Madrid). The group I have observed is made up of 27 students who are in the first year of Bachillerato (they are 16 and 17 years old). They have an intermediate level of English. In the case of the English subject, students are divided according to their level although I teach a mixed-ability class.

This is my first year as a teacher. This is one of the reasons which makes me think about different strategies and solutions to certain problems that I have observed in my teaching practice. By doing this, I try to improve my lessons and motivate my students. This research aims at discovering the types of activities my students enjoy and to provide them with a kind of extrinsic motivation. They will also help them learn in a meaningful and friendly environment.

During my observation I realised that my students, in general, present the following characteristics:

- Lack of interest, attention and participation.
- Some of them are very talkative.
- They do not present their homework regularly.
- Some of them do not complete the tasks I propose.
- Lack of motivation when dealing with some activities.

Sometimes, due to all these factors, it is really difficult to teach something and to create a relaxed atmosphere. One of the things I have observed at the very beginning is that the coursebook contains too many activities and the units are very long. My students do not like the exercises proposed in the book as they do not consider them interesting. This fact made me think about the possibility of integrating different activities into the dynamics of the classroom. Although this is a good idea, it presents two main drawbacks. On the one hand, it is time consuming as I have to spend more time either designing activities or looking for them in different sources. On the other hand, students can also get bored with some activities if they are not related to their preferences. Therefore, I have to know the students better and have a clear idea about their preferences and their needs.

Observation

After spending some hours thinking about this problem, I decided to do something to change my students' attitude towards the activities they are asked to complete. In order to do so I decided:

- Firstly, to analyse the different activities of the coursebook and the workbook and my students' reactions when dealing with them.
- Secondly, to analyse my students' attitude towards the exercises I propose to see if they show a higher level of motivation.
- Thirdly, to discover their preferences and needs according to their level, age, etc.
- Finally, to analyse their behaviour in class when participating in pairs or groups. I needed to know if they feel comfortable when sharing information and if they have an active role when participating in these tasks.

The process I have followed is the following. First of all, I paid attention to the aspects that I have just mentioned. Then, I listed the results I found concerning them and I tried to draw some conclusions so as to finally, create an action plan to solve the problems observed.

After having observed the class I am able to draw the following conclusions:

- Sometimes students do not bring their books to class because they prefer sharing them with their classmates. It becomes a problem because they are seated in pairs and the lack of book makes them more talkative, so they do not concentrate.
- I follow most of the activities presented in the book. It is boring for them to be completing exercises most of the time. I usually include a different task in the last ten minutes of the lesson. It is often a speaking activity such as talking in pairs or groups. This is the only moment of the class when they are really motivated.

- The procedure of the class is always the same. First of all, we correct their homework (if any). Then, I explain or review the grammatical aspect of the unit asking them questions to check what they have learnt and they ask me what they are in doubt about. After that, they complete some exercises from the book to check understanding. Finally, I propose a speaking activity.
- Students are not motivated because of different factors. On the one hand, most of them dislike English, so they do not pay attention in class. On the other hand, they are not interested in the topics presented in the book.
- My students present different learning styles and these have to be taken into account when designing the activities. I teach a mixed-ability class. If we, as teachers, do not consider these factors we are not helping them learn in a meaningful and easier way.

Action Plan

Although the book has to be followed somehow and it is useful for them to have a reference, I decided to incorporate different activities taken from several resources into my lesson and I have also created my own ones. The main techniques that I have used are: observation, the use of a questionnaire and also the use of a diary in order to find out my students' opinions.

Following Simpson and Tuson' words, (1995: 3) "observation [...] is also one of the most versatile ways of gathering information", I have developed two main types of observation. On the one hand, "*observation as just looking*" without a schedule, and on the other hand, making an *observation schedule* according to my needs. The results I obtained were noted down in my diary with the rest of the comments. This schedule contains the following information:

| | | | |
|-------------------------|------------------------------|--------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| Activity: | | | |
| Timing: | | | |
| Materials: | | | |
| Aims: | | | |
| Procedure: | | | |
| Grouping: | | | |
| Do they like it? | <input type="checkbox"/> Yes | <input type="checkbox"/> For a while | <input type="checkbox"/> Not really |
| Are they bored? | <input type="checkbox"/> Yes | <input type="checkbox"/> No | |
| Do they make an effort? | <input type="checkbox"/> Yes | <input type="checkbox"/> No | |
| Comments: | | | |

I have also used a diary where I have noted down only the relevant data concerning each of the new activities presented to see how the students accepted them. I checked to see if there had been a change of behaviour towards those new activities. It has served me to reflect on the things we have done, the students' attitude towards these tasks and to draw some conclusions.

In order to know my students' preferences about the activities to be developed in class I designed a questionnaire (see annex). It is useful for me to know their real thoughts about the activities and also to involve my students in the process. They tell me the truth because the questionnaires are anonymous. I decided to use a questionnaire because of the four main advantages that it presents, according to Munn and Drever (1990: 2):

- An efficient use of time.
- Anonymity (for the respondent).
- The possibility of a high return rate.
- Standardised questions.

The results of the questionnaire led me to the following conclusions:

- Boys and girls mostly coincide in the types of activities they like to perform. They agree in the case of the following ones:
 - Listening → "Fill in the gaps".
 - Reading → "Read a text and answer some questions".
 - Speaking → "Games".
 - Exercises → "Combine the book, the workbook and some complementary activities".
 - Games → "Something that helps them assimilate contents".
- As for writing, boys prefer writing about a free topic whereas girls like following a model.
- Boys prefer working in pairs. On the contrary, girls enjoy working in groups.
- In the questionnaire I also included two questions for them to give a free answer. Most of the students think that their favourite activities are speaking games when they play with a dice.
- Finally, as far as the activities they propose to improve the lesson they mention more games, using computers, watching films and listening to songs.

After having read and analysed all their answers, I introduced the following changes:

- First of all, I have decided to introduce new, varied, interesting and motivating activities. I start my class with a warm-up activity. It takes five minutes approximately. It helps my students relax and they start concentrating on what we are doing. It creates a friendly environment.
- Secondly, following their suggestions, as speaking activities I mainly propose games where they have to discuss some topics or describe some situations both in pairs and in groups, depending on the requirements of the activity.
- Thirdly, when dealing with discussion activities I make them work in groups or pairs. Most of the time they decide their own groups.

By introducing all these changes my students are more motivated, participate actively, present a very positive attitude and learn in a meaningful and entertaining way. One of the things that they have told me is that they like the fact that I am worried about their learning processes, their interests and that I try to change my teaching methods if they are not suitable for them. I always listen to my students, hear their voice and care about what they really want. I try to pay attention to their different learning styles.

I have designed a WebQuest¹ to introduce ICT in my class. It was something new for them and they really enjoyed the experience. They learn by doing so they have learnt some new facts thanks to this exercise. I have also created a blog² where they can post their comments and reinforce some of the aspects we review in the classroom. Although it contains elements that are for lower levels, I will soon introduce new aspects dealing with their interests and things we are studying in the classroom. From the activities I have incorporated, they have enjoyed: speaking games taken from different books, the WebQuest, creating a story with some words that I provide, The Balloon Game and the game called: Stop!. On the contrary, they get easily bored with activities such as commenting controversial sentences and Find Someone Who.

Final Reflection

I am really happy with the results I have obtained. I have learnt that observation gives the teacher very relevant clues about the dynamics of the class. It has helped me develop different activities to increase my students' motivation and involve them actively in the tasks I propose. The negotiation of activities with them has increased their motivation.

Students have discovered that they can enjoy learning English or at least, not to consider English to be a very boring subject (something that they previously thought). After three weeks of research and having included these changes in my class, the students were really happy and motivated.

We, as teachers, should consider action research as a continuous process in our educational context. It must be a process of observation and discovery. Every single day we have the opportunity to expand our knowledge by means of observation. We need to bear in mind that it is time consuming but it is worth trying it.

Some of the aspects that I have learnt by doing this research are the following:

- Students' active participation favours learning because they learn by doing.
- When I offer them different possibilities to choose I am favouring autonomous learning and they develop a critical eye on learning.
- I have also learnt how to do action research. It helps me understand aspects of my reality. It also makes me improve my teaching practice.
- Interaction between teachers and students is essential. We can negotiate certain factors and it will be very positive for the development of the classroom.

¹ It can be seen at: http://www.phpwebquest.org/wq25/webquest/soporte_tabbed_w.php?id_actividad=70522&id_pagina=1

² It can be seen at: <http://maberman.edublogs.org/>

- In order to motivate my students I, myself, must be motivated and propose interesting activities. I want them to have an active role in my class.
- My students really wanted to speak English but they needed time and the opportunity to interact in groups and put their knowledge into practice.

To sum up, I consider this experience a very useful and fruitful one. I am sure I will plan other types of research to analyse certain situations and improve them. My students are more motivated thanks to the activities I have introduced. Sometimes teachers do not realise that perhaps students are not motivated because of the dynamics of the class, the activities developed, the different topics dealt with, etc. I am conscious of the importance of observation and research in education to improve my teaching practice. Research allows me to innovate and improve.

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ANNEX: QUESTIONNAIRE

Answer the following questions:

1. Which LISTENING activity do you prefer?
 - a) Filling in the gaps
 - b) Answering questions
 - c) Ordering some sentences as they are heard
 - d) Looking for wrong words and changing them
2. As a READING exercise, you like...
 - a) Ordering paragraphs
 - b) Reading a text and answering some questions
 - c) Associating headlines to paragraphs
 - d) Linking descriptions that are related to the same topic
3. With regard to WRITING tasks you prefer...
 - a) Writing about a free topic
 - b) Following a given model
 - c) Describe certain images
 - d) Create a store with some words provided
4. Which SPEAKING activity do you prefer?
 - a) Games
 - b) Finding the differences
 - c) Commenting on some pictures
 - d) Create a story
5. HOW do you like to work?
 - a) In groups
 - b) Individually
 - c) In pairs
 - d) The whole class
6. WHICH of these options do you think is the best?
 - a) To complete activities from the book exclusively
 - b) To combine the book and the workbook
 - c) To complete activities from different sources
 - d) To combine the book, the workbook and some complementary activities
7. WHAT do you think about games?
 - a) They are a very good way to promote learning
 - b) They are a waste of time
 - c) They are funny but they do not make me learn more
 - d) It helps me assimilate contents
 - e) It does not matter to me
8. WHAT is your favourite activity?
9. WHAT activities would you propose for the classroom?
10. You are...
 - A boy
 - A girl