

THE LANGUAGE TEACHER AND STUDENTS' MOTIVATION: LET'S USE DIFFERENT TYPES OF ACTIVITIES IN THE CLASSROOM!

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Abstract

The following article aims to encourage reflection on the teaching and learning of a foreign language. The paper seeks to emphasize the importance of one of the most fundamental elements when learning a language: motivation. This essay reminds teachers the significant role they play in students' learning process as well as in the learners' level of motivation. This paper attempts to raise awareness about the need to motivate language learners, which can be achieved by using different types of activities. It is suggested to consider students' age, interests, needs and skills so that they can learn meaningfully, but also in an enjoyable way. The suggestions given in this article can be useful for language teachers in general.

Key words: language, teaching, learning, motivation, activities

Resumen

El presente artículo tiene como objetivo motivar la reflexión sobre la enseñanza y el aprendizaje de una lengua extranjera. Se enfatiza la importancia de la motivación la cual es uno de los elementos fundamentales en el proceso de aprendizaje de un idioma. También se enfatiza el rol del docente en el proceso de aprendizaje de sus estudiantes y en el nivel de motivación de los mismos. Este ensayo busca concientizar a cerca de la necesidad de motivar a los estudiantes de lenguas lo cual puede lograrse a través de diferentes tipos de actividades. Se sugiere considerar la edad, los intereses, las necesidades y las habilidades de los estudiantes para que puedan aprender no sólo significativamente sino también de forma divertida. Las sugerencias proporcionadas aquí pueden ser útiles a los maestros de cualquier idioma.

Palabras claves: lengua, enseñanza, aprendizaje, motivación, actividades

This is the road I have tried to follow as a teacher: living my convictions; being open to the process of knowing and sensitive to the experience of teaching as an art; being pushed forward by the challenges that prevent me from bureaucratizing my practice; accepting my limitations, yet always conscious of the necessary effort to overcome them and aware that I cannot hide them because to do so would be a failure to respect both my students and myself as a teacher.

Paulo Freire

1. Introduction

Now that I am living in Canada and I am teaching Spanish as a foreign language to a variety of international students, I have been reflecting on my own experience as a language learner and instructor in my home country, Mexico. One of the aspects I strongly remember is that when I was learning English in Mexico, I felt very comfortable and motivated to learn when my teachers created an environment where all students could interact

with each other, could express their ideas with respect and were given enough opportunities to have an active role in their own learning process. I felt like I could learn not only from the teacher, but also from my classmates. In other words, I felt part of a community where I had an important role and were motivated to learn. For these reasons, I think that one of the tools teachers can use to motivate language learners is by creating a sense of community in the classroom, which I believe can be in part achieved by the use of meaningful activities that motivate students to start or continue learning a foreign language. Of course, there are many ways to create a community and to motivate students, but in this paper, I will mainly focus on the teacher and the use of activities.



Figure1. Students of Spanish. Picture taken by the author (2013)

2. Motivation

There has been much discussion regarding motivation; however, it is a term that has not been easy to define. That is why I think that the best way to start this essay is by using Dornyei's (in press) quote "I don't know what motivation is but it definitely keeps me going". In my experience as a language learner, motivation was what encouraged me to continue learning a language and that is why I believe that motivation is a key factor when learning a language (Ellis, 1994) despite the complexity to define such a term. Therefore, I consider it is important to pay attention to *what* motivates language learners in the classroom. According to Wang "the motivated learners are usually more active in learning, while unmotivated learners are more likely to cause classroom disturbances" (Wang, 2006: 32); however, I think that it is worthwhile for teachers to focus and try to motivate both types of learners. Why? Because both types of students deserve the same attention and I believe it is possible to motivate those unmotivated learners who are willing to cooperate and keep motivated those students who are already motivated.

According to Dornyei (2003) second language "is a learnable school subject in that discrete elements of the communication code (e.g. grammatical rules and lexical items) can be taught explicitly, it is also socially and culturally bound, which makes learning a deeply social event" (Dorney, 2003: 4). His statement shows how the linguistic view has shifted towards a more social direction, which is related to the motivational renaissance in the

1990's where researchers realized that "the classroom environment and the contextual surroundings of action had a strong motivational influence" (Dornney, *op. cit.*, p.11). Researchers noticed that what happens in the classroom, for example, the interaction between the teacher and the students and the students themselves as well as the type of activities that allow interaction and learning influence language learners' motivation. Thus, researchers started to pay more attention to the course-specific motivation components such as the relevance of the teaching materials, interest in the tasks and the appropriateness of the teaching method (Dornyei, *op. cit.*, p.11). Another aspect that was given attention is the teacher-specific motivational components, for example, teacher's personality, behaviour and style (Dornyei, *op. cit.*, p.11).

There are instructors who believe that motivating students might lead to permanent dependency of the students on them (on the teachers). However, I feel that teachers can help students become independent learners through their daily teaching practices and even better if these are motivational practices. It is also important to verbally remind students that they are responsible for their own learning and that as I say in class "good teaching and learning require teamwork", that is, cooperation from both the students and the teacher. Otherwise, "*no funciona*" (it does not work).

3. The teacher

I have experienced that teachers play such an important role in students' motivation (Dornyei, *op. cit.*, p.11). For example, in my experience as a language learner, I found that teachers who were approachable, charismatic, open to students' ideas, needs and suggestions and had a positive attitude towards teaching, were great motivators. As a result, I felt engaged in class and enjoyed learning. In contrast, those language teachers who made me feel intimidated and scared due to their teaching style and personality decreased my level of motivation. For these reasons, I agree with Savignon (1997) that "language teaching requires a sense of community -an environment of trust and mutual confidence wherein learners may interact without fear or threat of failure" (p. 122).

Also, teachers who encourage you to question your own reality can be great motivators. Being a teacher provides you with the opportunity to challenge oppression in the classroom and also to improve education. Therefore, I always look for opportunities in the classroom where students can question about *things* they take for granted, for example, their role as students and my role as a teacher or about the content of the lessons: Who decides what needs to be learned? I believe that significant work still needs to be done in order to change different ways of oppression. However, I feel that these can in part be challenged through education, through anti-oppressive education, for example. It is here where I find one of my missions as an educator. I know that learning is not just about students' acquiring what some in schools and society have already determined to be things that they are supposed to learn. I agree with Kumashiro (2004) that learning needs to involve challenging the idea that commonsense ways of thinking about the world among students and among educators are the right ways of thinking about the world. Learning needs to involve opportunities to acknowledge and work through the resistances and emotions involved in raising awareness.

4. The Teacher's Roles

Teachers play different roles such as monitors, mentors, facilitators, supporters, artists, singers, etc., which makes the profession a challenging task, but also fun. It is this combination one of the reasons of why I love teaching so much as it challenges myself, but also allows me to continue growing. Also, I feel that teaching stimulates your creativity as you always need to develop new teaching strategies for learning to take place. The teacher can surprise students through their teaching techniques and activities, but also learners themselves can surprise the instructor, which is one of the most exciting parts when teaching.



Figure2. Surprised Spanish instructor while teaching
Picture taken by learner of Spanish (2012)

I like to remember that “no teaching method is suggested for any one teacher, for any one class, or for any one individual; the teacher should be cognizant of current trends and innovative techniques in foreign desired goals” (Grittner, 1990: 26). Since there is no “one true theory» (Grittner, 1990: 38), method or technique, I believe that we as language instructors need to be open to new methods and techniques. Also, we need to be aware that the variables to confront throughout our profession are many and might change from one class to another. Also, we need to decide where we want our students to go and then use whatever helps them to get there (Grittner, 1990).

5. Motivational Components

In terms of motivation, it is necessary to consider the group-specific motivational components, for instance, cohesiveness, goal-orientedness and the group norms that take place in the classroom (Dornyei, 2003). Therefore, the relationship among the students themselves and how they feel in the classroom also influence language learners' motivation. A good way to summarize the previous aspects is by using Wajnryb's (1992) idea: “learners who are ‘engaged’ by the lesson –by the teacher, the materials, the tasks, the activities– are more likely to have that learning make an impact on them” (p. 34), which also reflects the complexity of the motivational process in the language classroom as well as the challenging task that teachers have.

It has been found that people vary greatly in the ways they learn a language (Skehan, 1989). Therefore, the most frequent question that comes to my mind when talking about motivation and when observing my students in class is: *How can I teach and motivate 30 students with different ages, backgrounds, needs, interests and learning styles in the same classroom?* It has not been easy to find an answer to such a question. However, one

of the tools that helped me to do so is the use of different activities that take into account the previous aspects, for example, role-plays. Oxford and Lavine (1992) argue that “classroom instruction can provide a wide range of motivating activities that will work well with all learning styles” (para. 47) and I think that language instructors can balance their classroom activities “gearing different parts of the lesson to different learning styles” (Oxford and Lavine, 1992, para. 47).

I believe that students’ different learning styles provide teachers with opportunities to develop new strategies and a technique which helps teachers be better educators. Also, this makes language teachers’ work more interesting and challenging. That is one of the reasons why I think that being a teacher is one of the professions that always allows for both professional and personal growth because teachers have the opportunity to learn about their students and themselves continuously. This makes teaching and learning a reciprocal process.

6. Language Activities

According to Dornyei (2003) language activities are important because “they shape learners’ interest and enthusiasm” (p.14), make learning less stressful and less difficult and they reduce the anxiety in the classroom (Wang, 2006: 36). Thus, the way activities are presented and administered is also important because “they can make an enormous difference in students’ attitudes toward learning” (Dornyei, Dornyei, *op. cit.*, p.14).

I agree that “classrooms should be workshops full of ardent activity” (Comenius, 1592-1670, cited by Pennycook, 1989: 600) that is why I think that if we follow Comenius’ principles we can motivate students. He suggests that (a) the teacher should be lively and interesting, (b) presentations should be brief, (c) examples should be concrete, (d) students should always be active, (e) activities must be useful and relevant, (f) there should be variety in every class, and (g) games should be used (Comenius, 1592-1670, cited by Pennycook, 1989: 600). Comenius also suggests having students working together and using role-plays, dialogues and sketches. In addition, he suggests the integration of language teaching with other parts of the curriculum. I consider that Comenius’ suggestions give teachers excellent ideas about how to improve young language learners’ motivation and language learners in general.



Figure 3. Language learners during a potluck in class
Picture taken by the author (2012)

According to Wajnryb (1992), activities may involve “thinking, feeling, acting, moving about, prioritising, ranking, making judgements, negotiating, interacting with others, consulting other sources of information”, etc. (p. 34). By using activities that involve such aspects, I think students can develop their language skills, but also learn about themselves through the interaction with others (Kumashiro, 2004: 85). In addition, activities can help teachers familiarize themselves with their students better. Kumashiro (2004) states that “it is certainly important that teachers try to know their students, know their subjects, and know how to teach” (p. 7). In my opinion, when teachers know their students, it is easier for them to get learners involved in the material and activities of their lesson and they know how to teach and approach each individual. My main point in this essay is to emphasize the importance of using different types of activities, for example, both written and interactive and not just one type. By using a *variety* of activities, I think that the opportunities for language learning and motivation to take place are higher. For example, I suggest the use of interactive activities such as role playing and games because they “serve the purpose of teaching everyday language, and they also make learning fun” (Meetu, 2013, para. 7). Role-playing also serves the following objectives: “giving a chance to put knowledge into live practice, bringing a confidence and self assurance and practicing appropriate vocabulary and correct sentence formation” (Meetu, 2013, para.7), so interactive activities should always take place in the language classroom.

I also suggest using written activities such as fill-in-the-blank exercises, definitions, true-false activities, etc. (Oxford and Lavine, 1992, para. 38) because these types of activities can also meet the needs of certain learning styles. When I was a language learner, I noticed that teachers tended to focus on written activities when having students practice the target language. By doing so, I think instructors only met the needs of certain students. As a result, the needs of students who preferred interactive activities were not satisfied. Consequently, some students felt unmotivated and left out, which is how I felt when I did not have the opportunity to practice the target language through interactive activities. Therefore, now that I have the opportunity to be a language instructor and have had a variety of students with different learning styles and needs, my idea about the importance of using different types of activities has been reinforced. I try to use both types of activities so that I can better respond to my students’ realities. As a result, I think their motivation increases or at least remains the same.

To summarize the previous idea, it is not possible to say that all activities are useful for all types of learners, that is, certain activities might work for some students, but not for others. For example, there might be extrovert students who love learning and practicing the target language through role-plays as they find them fun. However, there might also be introvert students who experience anxiety when being asked to participate in a role-play as they do not feel safe in the classroom. Therefore, they perceive role-plays as a stressful activity, so they prefer practicing through written exercises. For this reason, it is important to have variety in class to increase the possibilities to better respond to our students’ different learning styles and to help them learn in a way where they feel comfortable and enjoy learning.

7. Language Learning

As Walqui (2004) points out “language learning does not occur as a result of the transmission of facts about language or from a succession of rote memorization drills” (para. 19). It is important to give students enough opportunities to use the target language through meaningful interaction with their classmates. I do not think that lecturing or recitations are the most appropriate ways to use the target language. Students should learn the

language by using it, not by memorizing it. “Teachers need to move toward more richly interactive language use” (Walqui, 2004, para.19), for example, to the language use that can be found in instructional conversations as well as in collaborative classroom work (Adger, Kalyanpur, Peterson, & Bridger, 1995). In addition, it is essential to remember that the learning of a second or foreign language in the classroom aims at preparing the learner to function in the target language in the real world so it is important to provide learners with numerous opportunities to use the language they are learning not only in class, but also outside of it. This practice might be motivational in itself as students are able to *do something/to achieve a goal* in the target language in real life. An example of this can be having learners of Spanish in Canada to go to a Mexican restaurant and order their food there where Spanish is spoken.

Freire (2002), in his *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, describes teacher’s talk about reality as if “it were motionless, static, compartmentalized and predictable” (p. 71). He also argues that the teacher’s task, according to the banking concept of education, is to “fill” the students with the contents of his/her narration – contents which are detached from reality. In addition, Freire (2002) points out that the teacher controls students’ thinking and action, and he/she inhibits creative power. The teacher is the oppressor and the student is the oppressed. In my point of view, it is possible to change such a concept of education by giving students the opportunity to take an active role in their learning process. One way to do so, in language learning and in the teaching of any subject, can be the use of activities where students can establish a dialogue with their teacher (Freire, 2002) and classmates. Also, I think that activities that promote students’ use of creativity and give them enough opportunities to express their ideas, thoughts, hopes and desires can make learning a process in which all grow (Freire, 2002) and can also stimulate students’ motivation.

8. The Ups and Downs of Motivation

Because learning a “language is a long process, students might experience the ups and downs of motivation, that is, the ongoing changes of motivation over time” (Dornyei, 2003: 18). According to Dornyei (2003), “motivation shows different characteristics depending on what stage the individual has reached in pursuing a goal” (p. 18), so I think we, as teachers, should not panic when we observe that our students’ motivation has diminished. I am not saying that we should ignore such a situation, but that we should understand that demotivation is also part of the L2 learning process. Instead of panicking, I suggest we look for new methods or activities that can help students maintain or increase their motivation.

As Richards and Rodgers (2001) state, the contextual factors in which teaching and learning occur are also important, for example, “the cultural context, the political context, the local institutional context, and the context constituted by the teachers and learners in their classroom” (Richards and Rodgers, 2001: 248). Thus, these factors influence the teacher’s performance in the classroom, for example, his or her tendency to use certain types of activities and/or his or her way to motivate students. For instance, I have heard that at the beginning of a language course, there are teachers who are told to use the textbook and its prescribed activities in class as much as possible, which I disagree with. I like to think of the textbook as one of the many resources I can use in the language class, not as the only one. Yes, the textbook is also a good resource as it might have interactive, fun and interesting activities; however, the problem is when our teaching relies only on it. I agree with Richards and

Rodgers (2001) that the contextual factors in L2 teaching also affect what teachers do in the classroom; however, teachers are also responsible for adapting the materials to their students' context.

I feel that language teaching and learning can and should be fun because a “language shapes both how we understand and how we negotiate our world, learning a language produces a deep awareness of difference (linguistic and cultural) while at the same time providing bridges to move across those differences” (The Report of the LSA Foreign Language Review Committee, 2004). Therefore, I consider language learning and teaching valuable and not synonymous with boredom. I think that the use of the appropriate activities in the language classroom can be one of the many tools that can make learning meaningful, successful and motivating not only for young language learners, but all in general.

9. Conclusion

In conclusion, I believe that motivation, for example motivation to learn a second or foreign language, is fundamental, so we as teachers should try to motivate our students, at least those who are willing to cooperate in their learning process. Also, we should not get unmotivated for those students who might never be motivated despite what we do. The use of different activities should take place in the classroom to increase the possibilities to respond to students' different learning styles and needs. It is true that language learners' motivation is a step-by-step, lesson-by-lesson process, which might be challenging. However, to me, such a process contributes to make teaching exciting, interesting and even fun.

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