

## Motivation in EFL Classes: Who does it depend on?

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### Abstract

The term "Motivation" is a catchword used by learners and teachers alike when trying to explain success or failure in learning. Teachers need motivated learners. Learners need teachers who motivate them, engaging them in classes with dynamic resources.

But what is motivation? Who does it depend on? What does it depend on? This paper will attempt to provide some answers and suggest approaches and strategies to engage learners and keep them motivated in a foreign language class.

### Introduction

Since the launch of the television series in 1989, *The Simpsons* has become an icon of modern culture. Many issues the show tackles with its signature tongue-in-cheek style, including education, school and learning, are usually satirized through Bart, Lisa, Bart's jaded teacher Mrs. Krabappel and Mr. Skinner, the uptight school principal, named in honour of the behaviourist psychologist B.F. Skinner.

The episode "*Bart gets an F*" from Season Two stands out as a particularly strong example of the impact a teacher's beliefs and attitudes may have on motivation, learning, success and failure in the classroom.

Bart Simpson has finished a History test. "*Do you think you can correct it now?*" he asks Mrs. Krabappel impatiently. Bart's middle-aged teacher sighs and says, "*Ok, let me get old red. That's another F. Another year together. It is going to be hell.*" Bart pouts. He is on the verge of tears. What could cause this mischievous, obnoxious child who doesn't seem to care less about school and grades to cry feel like crying? Mrs. Krabappel is perturbed by Bart's tears. In an attempt to comfort him, she says, "*I figure you would be used to failing by now.*" To which Bart answers back sobbing, "*But I really tried this time! This is as good as I can do and I still fail!*"

Mrs. Krabappel, moved by what Bart has said (probably as well as by a sense of guilt), revises the test and turns the F into a D minus. Bart stares at the test and asks, "*You mean, I passed?!*" The teacher nods and adds, "*Just barely.*" Bart gasps, swirls around, kisses the teacher and then leaves the classroom, brandishing the D minus on the test and announcing to everybody who crosses his path, "*I passed! I got a D minus! I passed!*" When he arrives home, he proudly hangs the "D minus" on the fridge for all the family to admire and celebrate.

What Matt Groening, the creator of the show, and scriptwriter Michael Stern depict in this episode of the popular and iconic show are the intricate connections between teachers' expectations and those of their learners; learners' competence or incompetence; internal and external rewards; success and failure; and ultimately motivation--illustrated with the humour for which the series is known.

The aim of this paper is to delve into the need of motivation in learning, in general, while in terms of learning a foreign language, specifically discuss the role of the teacher; analyse what motivates learners and what does not; and, in conclusion, suggest approaches and strategies to engage learners and keep them motivated in a foreign language class.

## Defining “Motivation”

According to Zoltan Dörnyei (2001), Professor of Psycholinguistics at University of Nottingham, the term “motivation” presents a real mystery. To Douglas Brown (1994: 112), it is “probably the most often used catch-all term for explaining the success or failure of virtually any complex task.” When trying to define the term, researchers’ opinions diverge at an alarming rate. Dörnyei states that the word has become an obsolete umbrella term for a wide range of variables that have little to do with each other. Probably the only thing most researchers would agree on is that “motivation” is responsible for why people decide to do something, how long they are willing to sustain the activity and how hard they are going to pursue it.” (Dörnyei, 2001:8).

## Behaviourist versus Constructivist

For argument’s sake, let us assume that the concept of motivation can be analysed from two different perspectives: a behaviouristic one and a cognitive one. The behaviouristic paradigm views motivation as a set of rewards, avoidance of punishment and positive reinforcement that lead an individual to behave in a certain way.

Cognitive psychologists, on the other hand, consider motivation to be an inner drive, impulse or emotion that moves an individual to a specific action. According to David Ausubel (1968), as cited by Douglas Brown (1994:152) the concept of motivation is undergirded by six needs: the need for exploration, the need for manipulating one’s the environment, the need for activity, the need for stimulation, the need for knowledge and the need for ego enhancement.

Maslow (1970), in accounting for motivation, listed hierarchical human needs that range from basic necessities related to survival—such as air, water, and food—to higher needs of security, identity and self-esteem, which, when fulfilled, lead to self-actualization.

## Intrinsic versus Extrinsic Motivation

The dichotomy established by behavioural and cognitive psychologists is clearly reflected in the distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. Extrinsic motivation is triggered by external factors such as money, prizes, grades, and some instances of positive feedback. On the other hand, intrinsic motivation stems from a sense of self reward that brings about feelings of competence and self determination.

## Motivation in Foreign Language Learning

The difficulty in defining what we understand by “motivation to learn something” becomes even more complex when we apply the construct of motivation in foreign language classes. Robert Gardner and Wallace Lambert (1972) distinguished between **instrumental** motivation and **integrative** motivation. The first one refers to the need to learn a language as a means for attaining certain goals such as getting a job, getting a promotion, reading technical material, being able to translate texts, passing an examination and so forth. The latter refers to the desire to learn a language to communicate with people of another culture.

The instrumental versus integrative model described by Gardner and Lambert has been highly influential in studies of motivation in foreign language learning. However, there has been a need to incorporate cognitive and constructivist approaches. Williams and Burden (1997:120) state that motivation in foreign language learning should centre around the premise that what motivates a person to learn a foreign language and stay motivated until a certain level of proficiency is reached will differ from individual to individual. The authors add that motivating a learner of a foreign language implies not only sparking an initial interest but also entails sustaining that interest for a long period of time.

## **What Motivates Learners**

Alan McLean (2003) provides a framework of motivation he calls “The 3 A’s”. He states that learners will be motivated if they develop a sense of affiliation, a sense of agency and autonomy. The first “A” refers to affiliation. It refers to a sense of belonging, of being taken into account and valued. The opposite of affiliation would be alienation. The second A, refers to agency. It entails developing a sense of self-belief, competence, self-efficacy and a sense of control. The opposite of agency is apathy. The third A refers to autonomy, in the sense of self-determination. The more autonomy a learner has, the more motivated the learner will be. The opposite of autonomy is anxiety. Anxiety appears when the learner is overwhelmed and feels discouraged.

### **A sense of affiliation**

Learners need to feel the teacher cares. The teacher’s lack of interest in the learner or lack of knowledge about the learner will hinder motivation. One of the teacher’s most important tasks in the classroom is to develop a sense of affiliation in the learners by tuning into the learner and establishing a rapport.

### **A clear structure**

Learners need to feel the teacher knows what he/she is doing and that he/she is in control of the situation. Teachers should provide a clear structure. Learners should perceive there is a plan behind the teacher’s action and clear objectives. Learners should know what is expected of them with the goals clearly explained to them. The teacher should set limits by telling learners what they can and cannot do. Knowing the rules develops a sense of security in the learners. McLean states that this structure provides a holding ground which develops a sense of security and minimalises chaos.

### **A relevant and meaningful curriculum**

Learners should feel interest in what they are learning. The teaching of grammar and lexis, as essential as it is to acquire a foreign language, should be done through meaningful content. Meaningful and comprehensible content, appropriate to a learner’s needs, age and interests, will engage learners more than linguistic content per se. Learning about the world as well as a language provides learners with a feeling of achievement that raises their self-esteem as they are enabled to bring prior knowledge to the lesson. Using prior knowledge activates meaningful learning. David Ausubel (in Brown 1994: 79) defines meaningful learning as the process of relating and anchoring new material to relevant established entities in the cognitive structure. Meaningful learning brings about meaningful language.

### **Appropriate feedback**

Teachers’ feedback is essential for learners to develop a sense of self-efficacy for learning. According to Albert Bandura (1993), self-efficacy refers to the learner’s beliefs about their own capabilities to carrying out certain specific tasks. People with a low sense of self-efficacy in a given domain perceive difficult tasks as threats and are likely to give up. Usually, feedback is biased by what the teacher believes about the learner. If a teacher pins the label of failure on the learner, both the teacher’s and the learner’s beliefs will be difficult to change.

### **Autonomy**

Douglas Brown (1994) states that motivation is highest when learners are empowered to make their own choices, opposed to situations in which they are limited to following the teacher’s instructions. Fostering a sense of autonomy in the learner depends on the role the teacher adopts in the class. Williams and Burden (1997) claim that the teacher should act a mediator, whose main concern should be empowering the learner, helping the learner take control of his/her own learning and enabling the learner to become independent thinkers and problem-solvers.

One of the main strategies teachers should use to move learners towards autonomy is “scaffolding”. The teacher scaffolds knowledge and learning. The term “*scaffolding*” was developed as a metaphor by Wood, Bruner and Ross (1976) to refer to the assistance a teacher or peer offers learners. In the process of scaffolding, the teacher helps the learners to master a task or concept they are unable to grasp independently. The support provided by the teacher is given through the use of simplified language, teacher modelling and visuals. As is true with the scaffolding on a building, once learners have mastered the task or concept, the teacher should slowly withdraw, allowing learners to become autonomous.

## **Approaches & Strategies that Motivate Learners**

### **Topic-based Approaches**

One of the most effective approaches to teaching a foreign language to learners of all ages, at any level, is through content or topics. Content is motivating. Content is meaningful and presents the target language in context. It allows learners to bring their prior knowledge to the class and turn the class into a “*learning about the world*” experience, which engages students much more than learning grammar rules.

According to Lynne Cameron (2001:180), “the essential notion of topic-based teaching is that many different activities are linked together by their content. The theme or topic runs through everything that happens in the classroom and acts as a connecting thread for pupils and teachers.” Taking Cameron’s idea of a connecting thread, a topic-based project may be compared to a pearl necklace. Each bead on a necklace contributes to its form. In a topic-based approach, each task designed—everything done in class—should contribute to the topic being explored. And, like the string holding the beads together on a necklace, in a good topic-based project, learners do not see “the string”. What they see is a succession of tasks like the beads in a row on a pearl necklace.

## **Strategies to Motivate Learners of a Foreign Language**

### **Choose topics that will interest them**

There are as many possible topics as there are learners learning a foreign language. Topics may be connected to subjects such as History and Literature. For example the teacher may create a project on *The Greedy Eighties* and establish connections between the ‘80s on *Wall Street* and the ‘80s in Manchester and have learners read a version of “*The Full Monty*” that suits their level. Learners may explore the ‘20s and learn about Sacco and Vanzetti, Al Capone, Prohibition, and read a version of Fitzgerald’s “*The Great Gatsby*” suitable for their level.

Topics may be directly connected to the media. The characters of the TV series *Lost* may be described and compared. The iconic show *The Simpsons* may be another topic of interest to children, teenagers and adults.

While sustaining that working with topics related to the media is meaningful and motivating, and that eventually this will bring about meaningful language, it is important to bear in mind that meaningful language does not emerge just because content is introduced. The teacher will need to scaffold the language that will be used as input to turn it into something comprehensible.

### **Scaffold Comprehension & Production**

Comprehension can be scaffolded through the use of “*Mind Maps*”. A “*Mind Map*” is a graphic tool which contains a central key word or image and secondary ideas that radiate from the central idea as branches. The key idea crystallises the subject of attention, while the branches represent the connections established with the central idea, forming a connected nodal structure. (Casco, 2009)

A map facilitates comprehension because it offers the learner a global view of what he/she is going to listen to or read. In addition, the embedded cues contained in the map prompt the learner to form inferences that in turn act as an aid to understanding. Furthermore, the map serves as a tool for the learner to organize his/her thoughts and speech. The different elements of the map can be easily linked and cross-referenced allowing the learner to create a different discourse each time the learner uses the map. (Casco, 2009)

### **Make learners predict**

When learners are asked to predict and draw conclusions about a certain topic, the teacher is allowing the learner to bring prior knowledge into the class. Learners' predictions will engage them and make them commit themselves to the topic.

### **Create suspense by presenting a cognitive conflict**

"Human beings view incongruity, uncertainty, and disequilibrium as motivating" states Douglas Brown (1994:156). Teachers should include as many "cliff-hangers" as possible when planning a class. Asking learners to listen to musical clues and establish possible connections with the next topic may arouse interest and create suspense. Having learners guess what is inside a box that may be related to the topic they are exploring can make learners curious.

### **Conclusion**

Bart Simpson epitomizes the average unmotivated student who is considered an under-achiever not only in the USA but in other countries as well. His frustration and resignation represent what many learners feel when being labelled a failure. His reaction to an external reward such as a D minus instead of an F, which sparks his interest for a short time, is the same to what any learner may feel when passing a test. But are external rewards enough to sustain motivation? Will Mrs. Krabappel change her expectations about Bart's incompetence? In Bart's case, surely not. Bart will always be labelled a "bad student" and "under-achiever" and many of the show's fans will appreciate that. But what about real learners? What can teachers do to have fewer "Barts" in their classes? Does having motivated learners depend **only** on teachers?

It is crucial to understand that motivation is the key to learning and that the teacher's role is vital. Nevertheless, not all the responsibility lies with the teacher. Oscar Juan Blake(2005:29), a well-known Argentinean expert on training and development when asked the critical question "Who does motivation depend on?" stated "*You can't motivate people. You can create the necessary conditions for people to develop motivation. You can demotivate people.*"

Being able to motivate a learner may be compared to lighting a fire. The matches or lighter are brought by the learner; the wood is provided by the teacher. Without matches, no fire is possible even if there is wood available. If there is no drive in the learner to learn, despite the teacher's efforts, there will be no learning. However, if the learner has an inner drive to learn (if he/she brings matches) and the teacher does not provide the learner with what he/she needs (the wood), the responsibility for not motivating the learner lies with the teacher. As a result, the teacher needs to make use of all the resources and strategies available to turn each task into an opportunity to engage a learner and lead him/her to success in language learning.

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