

The What and Why of Motivation

Motivation is a topic close to every teacher's heart, and comes up very often when teachers talk about their students. Those with years of teaching experience would say without hesitation that student motivation is central to any kind of learning, and that it plays a particularly important role in language learning. Teachers know which students are motivated and those not so motivated, and associate the former with greater success in language learning. Hadfield & Dörnyei (2013), for example, believe that motivated students achieve more success because they tend to work harder and are more enthusiastic and goal-oriented. Motivated students don't give up easily and persist in their efforts to achieve their goals, and, perhaps more important, they find learning enjoyable. Unmotivated students, on the other hand, need constant encouragement, do not try hard enough, do not enjoy learning, and have low self-esteem and negative attitudes toward language learning.

What Is Motivation?

Motivation is concerned with the questions of why people choose to do or not do something, how much effort they are going to put in to do the activity, and how long they will be participating in the activity (Dörnyei, 2001). When students choose to participate enthusiastically in a language lesson and are willing to extend sufficient efforts even when the activity is challenging, we know that they are motivated to learn and are likely to absorb and remember more. Those who are not as motivated are generally less enthusiastic about participating in the lesson; they often do not put in the required effort and give up easily when the task becomes harder.

The definition of motivation above is quite simple and easy to understand. But when we take it one step further and try to flesh out the sources of student motivation, we are likely to have a wide range of answers. Teachers I have worked with say that the following are important sources of student motivation.

- Attitude toward the target language. Students who have positive attitudes towards the target language, its culture and community, and who appreciate the social and economic benefits associated with being proficient in the language, tend to possess a higher level of motivation.
- Perception about the immediate utility of the target language in the community. Students feel more motivated if what they learn in the classroom can be put to immediate use outside the classroom.
- Sense of competence in the target language. Students' motivation goes up when they feel that they have the required skills and abilities to perform a task.
- Perception about the enjoyment level of the lesson. Students become more motivated when they find the lessons intrinsically interesting and enjoyable, when they learn things that they like and want to learn, and not because they have to learn.
- Classroom learning environment. When the classroom is stress free and students can participate without fear of being ridiculed when they make pronunciation or grammar mistakes, they tend to be more motivated to take risks and learn.
- Teacher's personality and teaching effectiveness. Students tend to have higher motivation if their teacher is warm, humorous, caring, and can teach well.

Reflective Break

- Which three sources of motivation above are the most important in your own classroom?
- Please list two or three additional sources of motivation you think are important in your school.

Why Is Motivation Important?

Teachers have a high regard for motivation because it often “makes the difference between learning that is superficial and shallow and learning that is deep and internalized” (Gambrell, 1996, p. 15). Students who are motivated and engaged are better at utilizing their cognitive resources to learn more effectively and efficiently. They do not just sit passively waiting for knowledge to be delivered by the teacher; instead, they actively process the lessons in ways that allow them to develop a deeper and more robust kind of learning. When learning a new word, for example, they will not just attend to its meaning, but will go further by noticing how the word is spelled, what part of speech it belongs to, what kinds of words it collocates with, and how it is different from or similar to the other words that they already know, and they will seek opportunities to use this word in real communication.

Although motivated learners are every teacher’s dream, the reality is that we cannot expect every student to be equally motivated (Winke, 2005). In places where English is perceived to be unimportant for students’ daily communicative needs, it is often hard to convince students that they need to learn the language. To make matters worse, English lessons are often perceived to be difficult and uninteresting.

Reflective Break

- Do you agree with the statement that without motivation, not much learning can happen in the language classroom?
- Are your students generally motivated to learn English? Why are they (un)motivated?
- What do you normally do to keep students' motivation level high?