

## What motivates and demotivates learners?

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# What motivates and demotivates learners?

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英語学習の動機付けとして大切なものは何であろうか。Dörnyei の10か条からいくつか取り上げてみる。一つは、明確な goal を持たせることであろう。もう一つは learner autonomy を考慮に入れることである。学生に興味を持たせるために、内容によって選択させたり、またトピックを選ばせて話させたりすることなどが考えられる。学生に motivation を持たせるものは何かの答えは、関西大が実施している授業評価のアンケート結果からも明らかである。高校時代の goal-orientedness を持続させたいものである。

## 0. Introduction

In *Psychology for language teachers* Williams and Burden state that “It is important to emphasize here that motivation is more than simply arousing interest. It also involves sustaining that interest and investing time and energy into putting in the necessary effort to achieve certain goals.” In other words, sparking an initial interest is not enough for teachers. We have to sustain it. And I believe Dörnyei would answer this fundamental question. So I would like to introduce Dörnyei’s *Teaching and researching motivation* (2001a) and find the areas that are useful in my current teaching or was useful in my past experience. By focusing on Chapter 5, I’d like to discuss what we as teachers can do or cannot do based on what he writes in this chapter. I also reflect on the feedback on my course questionnaires.

## 1. What motivates learners

First I’d like to examine some of Dörnyei’s “Ten Commandments for Motivating Language Learners” (p. 138).

*Present the tasks properly.*

We have to make sure that they are not too difficult or too easy. This includes the clarity of explanation of the task and the appropriateness of illustrations or pictures that are involved.

We should add extra attraction or interest to the task to eliminate boredom as Dörnyei (2001b) mentions.

*Develop a good relationship with the learners.*

Experienced teachers know that gaining trust from students is a prerequisite for successful education.

*Increase the learner’s linguistic self-confidence.*

This is most important because tests are made so that some students receive low marks and as a consequence, they lose confidence. We must make sure that test scores are not the only indicators to show their linguistic competence. Some are good at speaking. Others are good at pronunciation, which a written test cannot evaluate. If the test is only writing oriented, we have to make sure that we can evaluate other aspects in class objectively. Generally the method in which English is currently taught in high school is demotivating because the task, which is usually translating English into Japanese, is far from increasing the learner's self confidence. Everybody seems to be wasting their time looking for the right Japanese words for each English phrase. So various kinds of tasks should be provided in each class so that everyone can participate in something.

*Promote learner autonomy.*

As Littlewood (1999) summarizes, definition of autonomy includes these central features:

“Students should take responsibility for their own learning. This is both because all learning can in any case only be carried out by the students themselves and also because they need to develop the ability to continue learning after the end of their formal education.

“Taking responsibility’ involves learners in taking ownership (partial or total) of many processes which have traditionally belonged to the teacher, such as deciding on learning objectives, selecting methods and evaluating progress” (p. 71).

Promoting learner autonomy is often stressed but regulations by the curriculum prevent us from keeping this in mind. I have attempted to incorporate this ideology in my teaching style. For instance, having students read at their own pace rather than having them read together at the same time in class. Outside of class we can always encourage them to read web pages.

*Increase the learners' goal-orientedness.*

We can do this by encouraging learners to take official English proficiency tests such as TOEIC. Moreover there should be some courses geared for one particular test.

*Familiarize learners with the target language culture.*

This is easily done and learners never become bored with listening to cultural aspects of English. I always talk about politeness, the rules of which vary depending on the culture. For instance, I stress the use of the polite form “would you mind” if they have to ask someone to do something regardless of the status of the addressee. In fact this is the area I would like to focus on through the entire course. Culture in general is very broad but to teach this one particular tact never seems to bore most students. From the moment students start learning English, the teacher translates English into formal Japanese, so learners have no idea about the degrees of

formality in English.

Williams and Burden (1997) discuss a few items to promote interests.

- Discuss with learners why they are carrying out activities.

For instance, if learners take only written examinations, chances are they have no idea why they have to listen to English. The teacher must explain that listening plays a very important role in the process of acquiring a foreign language. In this way the learners are more motivated because the activity becomes meaningful.

- Give feedback that is informational.

“The information can be about additional cultural background or how well each learner is doing.”

To explain the need of relevant feedback, I will discuss the feedback I received at Kansai University, which I will discuss in detail, and in connection with Dörnyei’s motivation.

(1) Students need autonomy.

They want to have some control of class, such as choosing a topic or material. Rather than simply giving them a topic, we should have the students choose a topic by themselves and study about the topic. If the class is divided into groups, they will compete with each other. Having them choose a course itself is ideal, as Littlewood’s summary suggests. Even if this is impossible, we have to consider a negotiated version of autonomy. Aoki and Smith as referred to in Littlewood (1999) conclude:

“the important issue...is not whether autonomy itself is appropriate, but how negotiated versions of autonomy can be best enabled in all contexts, in varying ways, in educative counterbalance to more authoritarian, teacher-dominated arrangements” (p. 72).

The approach Riggienback (1999) takes in *Discourse Analysis in the language classroom* is a perfect example in which learners have autonomy under the guide of the instructor. In a number of activities, learners are expected to become experts in different disciplines of discourse analysis and collect data and analyze them.

(2) Students need participation.

My students said they felt most fulfilled when they created dialogues in pairs. Active participation of weak students was especially striking. Students’ motivation is not only individual but also social. Dörnyei (2001c) supports this idea: “It is easy to see that if one is paired up with a highly motivated or unmotivated partner, this pairing affects the person’s own disposition toward the task; in other words, task motivation is co-constructed by the participants” (p. 48). He further investigates this point in *The motivational Basis of*

*language learning tasks* (2002).

Their positive attitude in making a dialogue also shows their willingness to communicate in L2.

(3) Students need to see a clear goal in the course.

The students do not express any other interest than was written in the course guide, so we should stick to the guide we give students at the beginning of the course. And the guide should be specific. This is relevant to what Williams and Burden gave in their summary. "Learners learn what is meaningful (p. 205)." Students show no interests in TOEIC practice if they are not going to take the test, because the content shown in TOEIC practice does not have any relevance to their lives. On the other hand, if they were thinking of working in an office where English is the common language, such practice would be very meaningful and active participation would be expected.

(4) Students need to feel competent

Kansai University students felt satisfied when they wrote their own dialogue because they knew at least they could communicate something although they did it in awkward grammar. Fortunately, the grammar was not the focus of the lesson. I also learned that most students like to learn from qualified foreign teachers because they let learners feel competent by responding in various ways according to the level of the individual learner.

## 2. What demotivates learners

Teachers often do not know what discourages learners. So we have to keep some of them in mind. The most relevant point to this issue is Oxford's (1998) investigation. Oxford carried out a content analysis of essays written by approximately 250 American students (both in high schools and universities) concerning their learning experiences over a period of five years. One of the four broad themes she notes is on style conflicts:

Style conflicts between teachers and students, including multiple style conflicts, conflicts about the amount of structure or detail and conflicts about the degree of closure or 'seriousness' of the class.

I make it a rule to speak in English in class, but some students who cannot follow seem to become demotivated. In my questionnaires, I asked my students,

"Is my method better than a traditional one?" One student accurately pointed out Oxford's demotivation theme by answering, "I can't easily say which way is better, yours or a traditional one, because each learner has his own preference about learning style."

So we cannot or should not force everybody to follow what you personally believe is best.

Indeed as Dörnyei (2001a) concludes, "...demotivation is a salient phenomenon in L2 studies and that teachers have a considerable responsibility in this respect" (p. 155).

### 3. Motivation Research Questionnaire

I gave a course evaluation questionnaire written by Kansai University in November. I also gave another of my own early in the following year. And I learned a great deal from the students' responses. They were asked to rate on the scale of 1 to 5, 5 indicating 'strongly think so'.

One question in the questionnaire was quintessential. "Do you want to study more about this field stimulated by this course?" Although most students gave 3 or more, I cannot say I was successful in making autonomous learners. Negative comments I refer to later will explain about it.

I asked them to write freely what were positive things in my class. Most of the responses were centered around the part where I let them make a dialogue based on each lesson. It is essential to give learner autonomy for part of each lesson to motivate them to learn more. In another class one student wrote, "You should have given a discussion topic beforehand." That way students could have prepared and increased their autonomy and motivation by discussing related issues among themselves. They could have studied about a subject I am not familiar with. Their lack of vocabulary always put them under the control of the lecturer. They not only could have checked a dictionary but also studied about a particular subject on the Internet. The textbook I chose was good for them because it dealt with their daily lives and was therefore relevant to them.

Negative comments centered on the system itself, not me personally. "Those who want to practice listening should take your class," one of them wrote. "It is beyond me." Again here students show they want learner autonomy.

According to Dörnyei (2001a), "This teacher expectation has been shown to affect the students' rate of progress" (p. 175). I apply this to my classes by calling on every student equally. Students know that teachers should not give up on slow learners whether they want to be called on or not. If we give up calling on them, they will lose the opportunity to improve themselves entirely. I was also told to stick to the course guide. One said that I should have given more TOEIC practice instead of playing a mystery.

At the end of the term I gave a questionnaire of my own. I asked what motivated them in their high school days. I asked them to circle 1 or 2 or 3 based on how much it was true of them. 3 meant 'it was very much true', whereas 1 meant it was completely unlike them.

The items were:

- 1 When I was praised in class.

- 2 When I answered well in class.
- 3 When the teacher explained well.
- 4 When I understood the teacher's talk in English.
- 5 When I got a good grade in my homework.
- 6 When I heard about foreign culture.
- 7 When I felt the teacher's enthusiasm.
- 8 When I got a good comment on a test.
- 9 When I did my task well during class.
- 10 When I talked with a foreigner.
- 11 When the teacher spoke in English.
- 12 When a foreign teacher taught in class.

Write freely.

If you do not like English, when did you lose interest? Or why?

- 1 Almost from the beginning.
- 2 When I didn't understand the teacher's explanation.
- 3 When my test score was low.
- 4 When I learned English from a teacher I do not like.
- 5 When I knew we can't speak English even if we study at school.
- 6 When I found there were so many things to remember.
- 7 The teacher was always angry.
- 8 The teacher never called on me.
- 9 The class was noisy and the teacher had no control of it.
- 10 I don't like Americans or British people.
- 11 Because it was all grammar.
- 12 Because I don't think it is necessary.
- 13 It was not clear what I had to do by the next lesson.

Write freely.

Surprisingly, the result showed they do not really expect enthusiastic teachers. Students don't want an outstanding player. They just want good explanation. They like to hear about foreign culture. They want to learn from native speakers of English. These three points are the most important elements for learner motivation according to the result of my questionnaire. What is good explanation? The explanation should be not only about grammar or meaning but also clarity of directions of tasks or homework.

They also appreciate teachers who try to elicit students' interests.

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And the three demotivators were “When I did not understand the teacher,” “When I knew I couldn’t speak it even if I studied English at school,” and “Because it was all grammar.” No student seemed to have a personal grudge about their English teachers, which is fortunate, considering Dörnyei’s research that found that demotivation stemmed directly from the teacher. However, high school teachers seem to give an impression that the English they teach is irrelevant to real world English. We should tell them that is not the case.

### 4. Conclusion

First of all we must know what students want. High school teachers are in a very good position in this respect. Students want to know the fastest way to get a high score in the entrance examination. If they think the Center Test is important, give them a lot of practice for that. We learned from my questionnaire that students want to learn about foreign cultures. So we should make questions concerning culture of interest. We learned that they like foreign teachers. So why don’t we have ALTs teach Center Test practices instead of having them teach what they might call “meaningless dialogues”? Nobody cares where Tom or Lucy is going or has been. Why don’t we focus our listening practice on the stress problems that bother most students in the Center Test?

What teachers should do more in class is to give allowance for learner autonomy. In a university environment, there are lots of things we can do. If it is a reading course, we can bring several materials and have learners choose the passage they like and answer questions on that. Even when it is not possible, you can ask them to answer the questions freely and tell them the variety of answers they can get. If it is a writing course, it is even easier. Give students time to write freely. Have them choose the topic. Have them choose a cartoon to write about. If it is listening, have them listen to what they are interested in. If it is a speaking class, we should have learners search topics they like.

What teachers should not do is to give up on low-expectation learners. Giving everybody the equal opportunity is important because classroom atmosphere also influences the development of every student. We should not give students an impression that English is just a subject that has little to do with life in America, for instance.

Fortunately students do not expect a Mr. Chips or a Mr. Keating from the movie *Dead Poet Society* to appear before them. What they want to see is a down to earth teacher who knows their interests and delivers to them what they want. And they know that learning is not all fun. If we are conscious of their motivation in their everyday lessons, I am sure the students will flourish.



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