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What can teachers do to motivate their students? A classroom research on motivational strategy use in the Japanese EFL context

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Abstract

In this article, the authors present an empirical study on motivational strategies in English as a foreign language classes at the lower secondary school level. Teachers' actual use of 15 motivational strategies was described on the basis of self-reported frequency data over a two-month period. Furthermore, the relationships between the frequency of these 15 motivational strategies and the strength of students' motivation were investigated. The overall results showed that (1) teachers used these motivational strategies in a variety of ways; (2) there were only a few motivational strategies which showed a significant correlation with students' motivation. In addition, the authors found that (3) the effectiveness of some motivational strategies varied according to students' English proficiency level. Implications of these findings are discussed at the end of the article.

Keywords: motivational strategies; motivation; classroom research

Introduction

The question regarding how to motivate language learners has been neglected for a long time. The greatest concerns of many teachers, however, are exactly about this question. In Japan, as in other Asian countries, English has been taught as a foreign language (EFL), which means that learners do not have many opportunities to use English in their daily lives. They learn English in the classroom and usually have little chance to speak English outside the classroom. It is thus very difficult for teachers to motivate their students to learn English for communication. In addition, English classes at secondary schools in Japan often force students to study. Many learners in secondary schools thus tend to be demotivated toward learning English in this situation. This is also true of EFL classes in many other Asian countries (e.g. Chen, Warden, and Chang 2005).

To ameliorate this situation, on the basis of the empirical data obtained in the EFL classes in a lower secondary school, the authors investigated 15 motivational strategies used by the teachers, particularly focusing on: (1)

the frequency of strategy use; and (2) the relationship between its frequency and the strength of student motivation.

Literature review

Framework of research on motivation

Motivation, one of the most important factors for language learning, has long been investigated in the field of second/foreign language learning (e.g. Chen, Warden, and Chang 2005; Clement, Dörnyei, and Noels 1994; Crookes and Schmidt 1991; Dörnyei 2001a, 2001b; among others). Since Gardner and Lambert's (1972) famous distinction between integrative and instrumental motivations, many researchers have focused on motivation, and its theories have been developed. These theories have so far discussed which orientation might affect EFL/ESL English proficiency/ achievement. However, when teachers say that students are motivated, they are not usually concerned with the students' reason for studying (i.e. motivation orientation), but that the students do study, or at least are engaged in teacher-desired behavior in the classroom and possibly outside of it (Crookes and Schmidt 1991). In other words, two important issues, i.e. how to motivate language learners and how to maintain their high motivation, have not been fully investigated in our field. Studies concerning motivation thus have a gap between theory and practice. Recently, a handful of studies (e.g. Chambers 1999; Dörnyei 2001a; Dörnyei and Csizer 1998) have focused on teachers' techniques concerning how to motivate language learners and how to keep them motivated (i.e. motivational strategies), but, in the Japanese EFL context, especially for secondary school students, empirical data is still insufficient.

What are the motivational strategies?

Dörnyei (2001a, 28) defined motivational strategies as 'techniques that promote the individual's goal-related behavior.' He also states that motivational strategies refer to those motivational influences that are consciously exerted to achieve some systematic and enduring positive effects. According to his definition, motivational strategies seem to include motivational influences both in and out of the classroom. They are also not limited to teachers' techniques; others such as parents and peers can use them. According to Dörnyei (2001a, 27), however, the importance of motivating students is recognized especially by teachers who consider the long-term development of their students. Chambers (1999) also argues that teachers affect students' positive or negative attitudes toward an academic subject, and that teachers carry a huge burden of responsibility to motivate their students. In his survey, 11-year-old students were asked to give reasons as to why they enjoyed or did not enjoy any previous foreign language learning experiences they had, and 46% of them reported that their teachers had a positive influence on their language learning (p. 139). What teachers do is therefore the key determinant for motivating language learners.

Recent studies on motivational strategies

One of the most influential studies on motivational strategy was conducted in 1998 by Dörnyei and Csizer. They identified 10 motivational strategies for language teachers, the so-called ‘Ten Commandments’ of Motivation (Table 1). These were selected on the basis of a questionnaire administered to a total of 200 English teachers at various schools in Hungary, an EFL environment.

Table 1. Ten commandments of motivation by Dörnyei and Csizer (1998)

1	Set a personal example with your behavior.
2	Create a pleasant and supportive atmosphere in the classroom.
3	Present the tasks properly.
4	Develop a good relationship with the learners.
5	Increase the learners’ linguistic self-confidence.
6	Make the language classes interesting.
7	Promote learner autonomy.
8	Personalize the learning process.
9	Increase the learners’ goal-orientedness.
10	Familiarize learners with the target language culture.

Furthermore, Dörnyei (2001a) reported a total of 102 motivational strategies used in the language classrooms. He then grouped these strategies into four consecutive phases. The first phase is called ‘creating the basic motivational components.’ The second phase is ‘generating initial motivation,’ while the third phase is ‘maintaining and protecting motivation.’ The last phase is ‘encouraging positive retrospective self-evaluation.’

Sugita (2007) investigated 65 motivational strategies selected from Dörnyei’s 102 strategies mentioned above. Since she focused on the Japanese EFL secondary school context, only 65 motivational strategies were selected. These motivational strategies were ranked by 124 secondary school English teachers in terms of their importance. By statistical analyses, she found that the use of motivational strategies did not vary by (1) the grades teachers were teaching at, nor (2) teachers’ experience in secondary schools.

As described above, only a handful of studies have begun to focus on the use of motivational strategies. Most of them were conducted by using one-shot questionnaires. Researchers thus have yet to describe the details of strategy use. In addition, some researchers (e.g. Dörnyei 2001b; Nakata 2003) maintain that motivation is a dynamic factor that changes over time. Learners tend to demonstrate a fluctuating level of commitment even within a single lesson, and fluctuation in their motivation over a longer period can be dramatic (Dörnyei 2003). In order to understand this fluctuation, researchers need to adopt process-oriented approaches that take into account the ‘ups and downs’ of motivation. In addition, most of the recent studies attempting to examine

motivational strategies focused on data obtained from only one side of the classroom (i.e. either teachers or students). To describe their actual use, surveys including both teachers' and students' viewpoints are indispensable. The authors thus decided to conduct a long-term classroom study to elicit further characteristics of motivational strategies from both teachers' and students' point of view and to report them in the following sections. In addition, as Dörnyei (2001a, 2001b) claims, motivational strategies do not always work effectively and one of the factors affecting their effectiveness might be the difference in students' English proficiency levels. This claim is also put to the test in the following sections.

The study

Purposes

The purposes of this study are (1) to describe the teachers' actual use (frequency) of 15 motivational strategies in secondary school EFL classes, based on data obtained over a two-month period; (2) to examine the relationships between the frequency of 15 motivational strategies and the strength of students' motivation induced by these strategies; and (3) to investigate the differences in these relationships according to students' proficiency level.

Definition

The definition of the term 'motivational strategy' for this study is as follows: Motivational strategies are techniques consciously used by EFL teachers as ways to promote language-learning motivation.

The 15 motivational strategies

The 102 motivational strategies described in Dörnyei (2001a) were carefully translated into Japanese, the participants' mother tongue. Some of the items were adapted so that they could better fit the Japanese EFL situation. For easier understanding, similar items were grouped together, and questions which asked two or more things at a time were separated. The process of selecting the items was carried out by the first author and four English teachers in a lower secondary school. Consequently, a total of 65 motivational strategies considered appropriate for lower secondary school use were selected. They were then evaluated on a five-point Likert- scale in terms of their necessity in English classes by 124 EFL teachers from 57 lower secondary schools. All the teachers were teaching the 7th, 8th, and 9th graders. In this study, the top 15 strategies were selected and examined in detail. These 15 strategies (Table 2) were chosen as most 'necessary', based on the mean of the Japanese EFL teachers' evaluation +0.4 SD, where a huge gap between the 15th and 16th strategies was found.

Method

Participants

The participants of this study were: (1) five Japanese English teachers of 8th and 9th grades in an ordinary public lower secondary school in Kyoto, Japan (See Tables 3 and 4); and (2) their students (190 in total) in the nine classes (Table 4). The first author participated as one of the teachers. All the teachers were non-native speakers of English. Four of them were female, and one was male. Their teaching experience varied from the 1st year to the 27th year, and the grades they were teaching at also varied. These differences among the participants were confirmed to have almost no influence on the use of strategies (Sugita 2007).

According to Dörnyei (2001a, 25), whatever forms the motivational strategies take, the motivating process is usually a long-term one, building 'one grain of trust and caring at a time.' The authors therefore excluded the data obtained for 7th grade because teachers in the 7th grade, which is the initial year in Japanese lower secondary schools, have yet to construct rapport with their students.

A questionnaire for teachers

Many researchers (Allwright and Bailey 1991; Nunan 1992; among others) have noted that one of the most common methods of classroom research is observing/recording. It is, however, true that most of the 15 motivational strategies shown in Table 2 are unobservable. Besides, Dörnyei (2001a) mentioned the motivational strategies were 'consciously' exerted to achieve some systematic and enduring positive effect, yet this consciousness also cannot be measured by observation. Allwright and Bailey (1991, 4) have argued that an obvious alternative to observation is simply to give people an opportunity to report their experiences and thoughts. A traditional way of obtaining such self-reported data is to conduct surveys, usually through interviews or written questionnaires. To obtain data in this way, all the teachers in this study were asked to report on the frequency of their strategy use just after teaching class. According to Dörnyei (2001a, 25), in the classroom context, it is rare to find dramatic motivational events that reshape the students' mindsets from one moment to another. Rather, it is typically a series of minor events that might eventually culminate in a long-lasting effect. The authors, with the consent of the teachers, thus decided to administer the questionnaire several times over the two-month period from October to December 2005 (Table 3).

None of the teachers, excepting the first author of this article, were informed beforehand of the schedule of the questionnaire's administration. Before data collection, instructions for the questionnaire were given to all the teachers. In the instructions, they were asked: (1) to confirm the meaning of each motivational strategy; and (2)

to recognize that 'frequently used' or 'large number' does not necessarily mean 'good strategy use' in order to avoid overly inflated self-evaluation on the part of the teachers.

In the questionnaire (See Appendix A), use of each motivational strategy was reported by the five teachers on a five-point Likert-scale, ranging from (4) 'use three times in this lesson.' to (0) 'no use in this lesson.' Before administering the questionnaire, some teachers pointed out that there were quite a few cases in which one strategy was used over four times in one lesson. They also maintained that it was extremely difficult for them to keep a large number of use (i.e. over three times) in their mind until the end of the lessons. Based on these suggestions, teachers were asked to write (4) even if they used the strategy over three times.

A questionnaire for students

To investigate the strength of students' motivation induced by the 15 motivational strategies, a 15-item questionnaire was administered (See Appendix B). The strength of motivation was evaluated by the students on a five-point Likert-scale ranging from (1) never motivated to (5) well motivated. Teachers were requested to finish lessons five minutes earlier than usual to administer the questionnaire. The questionnaire was administered a total of 40 times (three to five times for each class) over the two-month period (see also Table 3). Teachers were instructed to confirm the meaning of each item with their students before administering the questionnaire. To avoid affecting students' response, teachers were asked not to reveal which strategies they had used in each lesson.

To investigate the relationships, Pearson's correlation analysis was employed. The analysis was performed with SPSS Ver 13.0.

Results and discussion

Findings in frequency count

Table 5 shows the average frequency of each strategy used per lesson. The teachers used each strategy on average once per lesson except MSs-2, 6, 8, 13 and 14. The lowest frequency was 0.35 for MS-2, and the highest was 1.47 for MS-4. There was no strategy that was never used throughout the 40 lessons.

Among the 15 strategies, three shown in Table 6 were chosen as 'frequently used' strategies based on the mean + 0.3SD. Teachers used these three motivational strategies more than once in each lesson.

Table 2. The 15 motivational strategies selected

Strategy #	Description
Strategy-1	Indicate your mental and physical availability for all things academic.
Strategy-2	Apply continuous assessment that relies on measurement tools other than pencil-and-paper tests.
Strategy-3	Provide multiple opportunities for success in the language class.
Strategy-4	Focus on the motivational flow in your lesson.
Strategy-5	Regularly include tasks that involve the public display of students' skills.
Strategy-6	Share your own personal interest in the L2 learning (e.g. in learning strategies or target culture) with your students.
Strategy-7	Vary the learning tasks and other aspects of your teaching as much as you can.
Strategy-8	Help learners accept the fact that they will make mistakes as part of the learning process.
Strategy-9	Bring in and encourage humor in the classroom.
Strategy-10	Encourage learners to attribute their failures to lack of effort.
Strategy-11	Keep the class goals achievable.
Strategy-12	Provide regular feedback about the areas on which they should particularly concentrate.
Strategy-13	Make assessment completely transparent.
Strategy-14	Assess each student's achievement (improvement) not by comparing with other students but by its own virtue.
Strategy-15	Create a pleasant and supportive atmosphere (for studying English) in the classroom.

Table 3. Details of the teachers, classes, and lessons

Teacher(s) M = male, F = Female	Teaching experience (years)	Grade	Number of classes examined	Number of lessons where questionnaire administered	
Teacher A	F	4	8	1	5
Teacher B	M	1	8	1	5
Teacher C	F	14	8	1	5
			9	1	4
Teacher D	F	1	9	1	5
			9	1	5
			9	1	4
Teacher E	F	20	9	1	4
Total				9	3
					40

Table 4. Number of students in the nine classes

Teachers in the 8th grade	A	B	C	D	D
Number of the 8th graders	20	15	20	20	28
Teachers in the 9th graders	D	D	C	E	–
Number of the 9th graders	18	22	20	27	–

Table 5. Mean and SD of each motivational strategy

Strategy #	Mean	SD
Strategy-1 (MS-1)	1.32	1.49
Strategy-2 (MS-2)	0.35	0.92
Strategy-3 (MS-3)	1.27	1.08
Strategy-4 (MS-4)	1.47	1.03
Strategy-5 (MS-5)	1.12	1.43
Strategy-6 (MS-6)	0.60	1.03
Strategy-7 (MS-7)	1.15	1.05
Strategy-8 (MS-8)	0.75	1.08
Strategy-9 (MS-9)	1.15	1.05
Strategy-10 (MS-10)	1.02	0.94
Strategy-11 (MS-11)	1.27	0.71
Strategy-12 (MS-12)	1.05	1.01
Strategy-13 (MS-13)	0.25	0.74
Strategy-14 (MS-14)	0.92	1.11
Strategy-15 (MS-15)	1.40	1.17
All Combined	1.00	1.05

Note: Figures after the second decimal place are omitted.

Table 6. Strategies frequently used in one lesson

MS-4 ($M = 1.47$)	Focus on the motivational flow in your lesson.
MS-15 ($M = 1.40$)	Create a pleasant and supportive atmosphere in the classroom.
MS-1 ($M = 1.32$)	Indicate your mental and physical availability for all things academic.

Table 7. Strategies not frequently used in one lesson

MS-13 ($M = 0.25$)	Make tests and assessment completely transparent.
MS-2 ($M = 0.35$)	Apply continuous assessment that relies on measurement tools other than pencil-and-paper tests.
MS-6 ($M = 0.60$)	Share your own personal interest in the L2 (e.g. in learning strategies or target culture) with your students.

Table 8. Average number of strategies used in one lesson.

Mean	SD
8.72	2.79

Note: Figures after the second decimal place are omitted.

Table 9. Number of lessons where each strategy was used

Strategy code	Number of lessons (out of 40)
MS-1	23
MS-2	8
MS-3	30
MS-4	36
MS-5	20
MS-6	14
MS-7	28
MS-8	17
MS-9	27
MS-10	27
MS-11	38
MS-12	26
MS-13	5
MS-14	20
MS-15	30
Average	23 (SD =9.41)

Table 10. Top four ‘constantly used’ motivational strategies

MS-11 ($M = 38$)	Keep the class goal achievable by re-negotiating if necessary.
MS-4 ($M = 36$)	Focus on the motivational flow in your lesson.
MS-15 ($M = 30$)	Create a pleasant and supportive atmosphere (for studying English) in the classroom.
MS-3 ($M = 30$)	Provide multiple opportunities for success in the language class.

On the other hand, the three strategies shown in Table 7 were recognized as ‘not frequently used’ in one lesson on the basis of the mean-0.3SD. The least frequently used strategy was ‘make tests and assessment completely transparent (MS-13),’ which was used about once out of every four lessons. Infrequent use of MS-13, and MS-2 might sound only natural to some readers. However, due to the constraints imposed by the Ministry of Education’s Course of Study (MEXT 1998), Japanese secondary school teachers have to assess their students’ English abilities frequently in various situations.² Many teachers thus recognize these two strategies as highly necessary, but the teachers did not actually use them frequently in this study.

Table 8 shows the average number of the different strategies (i.e. variety) used in one lesson. Teachers used approximately nine different strategies on average in one lesson.

The average number of lessons in which one of these strategies was used at least once over the two-month period was 23 (Table 9). The top four ‘constantly used’ strategies are shown in Table 10, while Table 11 shows the bottom three strategies. These top and bottom items were calculated on the basis of the mean 90.5SD.

The same two strategies (MS-4 and MS-15) were found in both Tables 6 and 10. These strategies were thus frequently and constantly used in the lessons. MS-1 appeared only in Table 6, which means it was used many times in a limited number of lessons. Both MS-3 and MS-11 appeared only in Table 10, which means they were used less frequently but widely used in many lessons. MS-3 was found to be ‘very important’ but ‘infrequently used’ in Dörnyei and Csizer (1998). In this study, MS-3 was considered ‘highly necessary’ but was not frequently used. It was also found to be constantly used. In Tables 7 and 11, the same strategies (MSs-13, 2, 6) were listed. These strategies thus were used infrequently and inconstantly in the lessons.

Relationships between strategy use and motivation

This section will discuss the relationship between the frequency of these 15 motivational strategies and the strength of students’ motivation induced by them.

Pearson’s correlation analyses show that the frequency of four out of the 15 motivational strategies were weakly correlated with the perceived strength of students’ motivation (Table 12) measured by the questionnaire.

Based on the coefficients and scattergrams, two out of four (Table 12) were judged strongly correlated with the strength of students’ motivation: MS-2 ($r=0.596$, $p<0.01$, $r^2=0.355$) and MS-6 ($r=0.492$, $p<0.01$, $r^2=0.242$). The other two showed weak correlations: MS-8 ($r=0.324$, $p<0.05$, $r^2=0.165$) and MS-12 ($r=0.344$, $p<0.05$, $r^2=0.118$).

To further investigate the relationships, the authors examined the differences in the relationship according to students’ proficiency level. For this purpose, the test scores of the 8th graders ($n=103$) in this study, all of whom had previously taken an English proficiency test (G-TEC for Students),³ were utilized. Based on the mean 90.5SD, the top 34 students and bottom 24 students were selected. The difference between the two groups in proficiency was confirmed to be significant in a t-test ($df=58$, $t=18.7$, $p<0.0001$, $r=0.93$).

Table 13 shows the strategy-motivation relationships in the higher proficiency group. As is shown in this table, four strategies out of 15 were satisfactorily correlated with students’ motivation: MS-2 ($r=0.719$, $p<0.01$, $r^2=0.517$), MS-5 ($r=0.559$, $p<0.01$, $r^2=0.312$), MS-10 ($r=0.530$, $p<0.01$, $r^2=0.281$), and MS-14 ($r=0.662$, $p<0.01$, $r^2=0.438$). The relationships in the lower proficiency group are shown in Table 14. In this group, five motivational strategies showed a significant correlation with students’ motivation: MS-1

($r=0.435, p<0.05, r_2=0.189$), MS-2 ($r=0.591, p<0.01, r_2=0.349$), MS-3 ($r=0.397, p<0.05, r_2=0.158$), MS-8 ($r=0.547, p<0.01, r_2=0.299$), and MS-12 ($r=0.619, p<0.01, r_2=0.383$).

Table 11. Bottom three 'constantly used' motivational strategies

MS-13 ($M = 5$)	Make tests and assessment completely 'transparent.'
MS-2 ($M = 8$)	Apply continuous assessment that also relies on measurement tools other than pencil-and-paper tests.
MS-6 ($M = 14$)	Share your own personal interest in the L2 (e.g. in learning strategies or target culture) with your students.

Table 12. Motivational strategies that showed a correlation with students' motivation

Frequency of MS Strength of motivation	MS-2	MS-6	MS-8	MS-12
MS-2	0.596**	–	–	–
MS-6	–	0.492**	–	–
MS-8	–	–	0.324*	–
MS-12	–	–	–	0.344*

Note: MS, Motivational strategy; Strength of M, Strength of motivation. $N = 40$; ** $p < 0.01$.

Table 13. Correlations in the higher proficiency group

Frequency of MS Strength of motivation	MS-2	MS-5	MS-10	MS-14
MS-2	0.719**	–	–	–
MS-5	–	0.559**	–	–
MS-10	–	–	0.530**	–
MS-14	–	–	–	0.662**

Note: MS, Motivational strategy; Strength of M, Strength of motivation. $N = 34$; ** $p < 0.01$.

Table 14. Correlations in the lower proficiency group

Frequency of MS Strength of motivation	MS-1	MS-2	MS-3	MS-8	MS-12
MS-1	0.435*	–	–	–	–
MS-2	–	0.591**	–	–	–
MS-3	–	–	0.397*	–	–
MS-8	–	–	–	0.547**	–
MS-12	–	–	–	–	0.619**

Note: MS, Motivational strategy; Strength of M, Strength of motivation. $N = 24$; * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$.

Comparing the relationships in the higher proficiency group with those in the lower proficiency group, we can see that the two proficiency groups did not share the similar trend in the relationship except for one motivational strategy (MS-2). In other words, the students' perception of effective motivational strategies was different depending on their proficiency level. Dörnyei (2001a, 30) points out that motivational strategies do not always work effectively, and argues that many factors (e.g. proficiency, contexts) influence their effectiveness. The results confirm that students' proficiency level is a factor influencing the perceived effectiveness of motivational strategies.

Another important point is that there were several motivational strategies (MS-4, MS-7, MS-9, MS-11, MS-13, MS-15) that showed no correlation with students' motivation even though they were used frequently. We thus can say that frequent use does not necessarily mean effectiveness, when it comes to motivational strategies.

Conclusion

This article describes a study on motivational strategies based on the empirical data obtained from both teachers and students in the Japanese secondary school EFL classes. Its major focuses were: (1) frequency of motivational strategies; (2) the relationships between the frequency of teachers' motivational strategy use and the perceived strength of students' motivation; and (3) differences in the strategy- motivation relationship depending on students' English proficiency level. As a result, we found that (a) teachers used motivational strategies in a variety of ways; and (b) there were only four out of 15 strategies that showed a significant correlation with students' motivation. We also found that (c) effectiveness of some strategies varied according to students' English proficiency level. The second and third findings indicate that we should carefully think about the ways in which motivational strategies are used, so that they will work effectively on students' motivation.

The present research was limited, however, in that it was conducted in only one school, although the school is a typical one in the Japanese EFL context. Moreover, the effectiveness of the motivational strategies described in this study was only for inside the classroom. Further research, therefore, will be needed to examine their effectiveness in other schools and also outside the classroom. Another limitation is the data collecting method used in this study. In this study, one method, self- reporting, has been used. Self-reporting, however, has its own limitations and might not necessarily provide the full picture of the teachers' use of the motivational strategies. Future studies therefore need to adopt the 'triangulation' of more than one method in collecting the data.

Lastly, the authors would like to point a pedagogical implication of the findings. Since the effectiveness of motivational strategies differed according to students' proficiency level, more attention should be paid to the difference in proficiency level when teachers attempt to motivate their students.

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Notes

1. The alpha coefficient of the questionnaire used was 0.928.
2. In the assessment system at Japanese public schools, teachers must abide by the cumulative guidance records, established by the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT 1998). English teachers in all public schools thus have to frequently administer many kinds of tests (e.g. interview tests, word quizzes, reading-aloud tests) to assess students' achievement from the criteria listed in the guidance.
3. G-TEC for Students Test is an English proficiency test developed by Benesse Corporation specifically for measuring English proficiency at the secondary school level in Japan. The alpha coefficient of G-TEC for students was between $\alpha = 0.79$ and 0.87 .

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