

## **THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE EXPERIENCE: THE IMPORTANCE OF THE STUDENTS' MOTIVATION IN ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN OR SECOND LANGUAGE CLASSES**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This article aims in demonstrate the importance of motivation in English language learning and its positive consequences for students' progress in acquiring the language. Initially, this paper seeks to investigate and points out the benefits of motivation and the use of communicative activities in order to have students interacting in all language levels. It strives to show that from motivation students tend to interact and become less dependent on teacher. The article also shows that tools such as music, songs, games, and technology play an important role in this so-called language learning process. It concludes that not only may motivation provide students with confidence, but also it may arouse interest in learning, and it considers the mistakes role as well.

Key-words: Motivation; Learning; Communicative; Teaching; Language.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Every teacher has got his/her own way of setting up their classrooms, the lexical set and the grammar points, interacting with students, and conducting their own lessons. For this, it is important to create the right atmosphere. Moreover, it is really meaningful to build up the students' confidence because they are not required to use new foreign language structures, phonetics and the likes before they have had an opportunity to listen and repeat words and sentences, and questions in chorus or even individually.

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Some advocate that students only start talking when they begin to understand, so creating the right environment for the classroom is bound to be a fundamental key to this so-called foreign language learning process.

Teaching is a hard process in which we – as English teachers – have to consider many different aspects such as students’ level, background, social context, interests, purposes, personality, age, learning styles, abilities, and personality characteristics. About those factors and others, Lightbown and Spada (1997, p. 33) say: “in addition to personality characteristics, other factors generally considered to be relevant to language learning are intelligence, aptitude, motivation, and attitudes. Another important factor is the age at which learning begins”.

Especially in the first levels – beginner and elementary – students might need more time to think and it is quite normal to have some moments of complete silence in the classroom while they absorb, process, and practice new information in the language they are learning. About those levels, Brown (2007, p. 112) says:

At the beginning or even false-beginning level, your students have very little language “behind” them. You may therefore be tempted to go along with the popular misconception that the target language cannot be taught directly, that you will have to resort to a good deal of talking “about” the second language in the students’ native language. Such is clearly not the case, as beginning language courses have demonstrated for many decades. But you do have to keep in mind that your students’ capacity for taking in and retaining new words, structures, and concepts is limited. Foremost on your mind as a teacher should be the presentation of material in simple segments that don’t overwhelm your students.

Yet, in those levels teachers can expect to engage in a lot of repetition of some limited number of words, expressions, questions, and sentences. Moreover, some teachers must consider a possibility of some changes in the first days or weeks. Students of the beginning levels are totally dependent on their teachers, so it is one of the responsibilities of the teacher to “keep the ball rolling”. Pair work or group work may be effective ways or techniques to have students working together instead of expecting much from the teacher. Many educators, especially those at the beginning of their careers think that the very first levels are challenging and the most difficult ones as well.

At the pre-intermediate level, students are sometimes shy and under-confident about speaking that foreign language in front of the whole class or the peers, and not surprisingly to the teacher.

At the intermediate levels, students seem more or less use the language in an effective way because they have already studied most of the elementary grammar rules and vocabulary. Although, students in this level still make basic mistakes, they are eager to speak and use the language they already know. About this level, Brown (op. cit.) points that:

Now, turn your attention to that vague curricular territory that we call intermediate, where students have progressed beyond novice stages to an ability to sustain basic communicative tasks, to establish some minimal fluency, to deal with a few unrehearsed situations, to self-correct on occasion, to use a few compensatory strategies, and generally to “get along” in the language beyond mere survival. The picture changes somewhat. Your role and the student’s capacities change. (p. 124)

And Last, but not least; Upper-intermediate and advanced students have experienced and received a lot of inputs and had much contact with the language, but they still can make some mistakes when trying to speak. Those mistakes are normal, and as confidence, they play an important role in the whole language learning process. In this stage teachers change their roles. Now they are supposed to create effective learning opportunities even within a predominantly learner-centered because the independence that students have acquired has moved on to another stage in the language learning. Brown (op. cit.) describes some techniques for those kinds of pupils:

Techniques can now tap into a full range of sociolinguistic and pragmatic competencies. Typical activities include group debates and argumentation, and complex role plays. Students also benefit from scanning and skimming reading material, determining and questioning author’s intent, and writing essays and critiques. Often at this level students have specific purposes for which they are planning to use English. (p.129)

Of course there are many levels in language learning, but not only the whole class, but also every single learner is a challenge. People learn in different ways. That is,

everyone has got his own way of learning languages; his own style – Gardner defines it as multiple intelligences. The desire to learn can come from many different causes, but we strongly believe that motivation might help pupils succeed in their language studies. Quoted by Lightbown and Spada (1997), Gardner (1985) says that “there has been a great deal of research on the role of attitudes and motivation in second language learning. The overall findings show that positive attitudes and motivation are related to success in second language learning”.

According to Abuêndia Padilha (1999), it is of vital importance that teachers since the very beginning of the learning process of a foreign language should develop a work with the students that promote confidence to their learning skills focusing on topics of their interest and by interaction among them. We advocate that in this way, learners will be able to continue with their learning process in a meaningful way. Not only can it provide a good language environment, but also motivation.

As an English teacher and based on our experience or not, we know that the classroom might be the only moment when students can have an exposure to the English Language. So, students are supposed to make that exposure as rich as they can, trying to take the risk of speaking in order to learn the language effectively.

This is not a surprise for many of us that teaching and learning is an unpredictable experience because sometimes students can be dynamic and engaged, but in some moments during the course, they can feel less enthusiastic about it. Every student has his/her particular reasons, but almost everyone usually have very busy lives with their works, studies, or families commitments and attending classes on a regular way is not always possible. This is one of the most common problems teachers have to deal with – irregular attendance.

How to solve the irregular attendance problem? How to make students feel more comfortable in the classroom in order to take risk of trying to speak? How to motivate students in English classes? Of course the answers for those questions are not so easy and they will take long analysis and study, but we can say that there are many options such as making use of the songs in the classroom, dynamics, games, and communicative activities. According to Harmer (2003, p. 5):

The need for surprise and variety within a fifty-minute lesson is also overwhelming. If, for example, students spend all of that time writing sentences, they will probably get bored. But if, in that fifty minutes, there are a number of different tasks with selection of different topics, the students are much more likely to remain interested. This can be seen most clearly with children at primary and secondary levels, but even adults need a varied diet to keep them stimulated.

Many methods, approaches and techniques have been developed along the decades in order to improve the teaching process. Many teachers have conducted their classes by following what they consider to be the best way to help students gain understanding in the subject they are studying and learning. But everything can be a completely waste of time, if students are not motivated or paying any attention to the lessons. According to Ellis (1985 p. 76):

Motivation is clearly a highly complex phenomenon. These four types of motivation should be seen as complementary rather than as distinct and oppositional. Learners can be both integratively and instrumentally motivated at one and the same time. Motivation can result from learning as well as cause it. Furthermore, motivation is dynamic in nature; it is not something that varies from one moment to the next depending on the learning context or task.

During our experience as an English teacher, we have found out that motivation is bound to be the key for students' understanding. Studies in language teaching have shown that when students are motivated they take risks in order to learn anything. In addition, whatever motivation learners seem to have, it is very clear that they are more likely to do better than the ones without any motivation at all. Those ones who get interested in something find useful reasons to be engaged in lessons. Harmer (2003, p. 8) has said that:

Famous research carried out in the second half of the twentieth century by Gardner and Lambert suggested that students who left most warmly about a language and who wanted to integrate into the culture of its speakers were more highly motivated (and learnt more successfully) than those who were only learning language as a means to an end (e.g. getting a job). In other words *integrative* motivation was more powerful than *Instrumental*

motivation. But whatever kind of motivation students have, it is clear that highly motivated students do better than ones without any motivation at all.

Thinking of sharing our classroom experiences and from the literature and the contact with other teachers, we decided to write some notes about the English teaching and learning experiences and we will discuss about important topics and suggest that some communicative activities, songs, and dynamics performed in the classroom are the best way to help teachers to find and build up learners' motivation.

#### MUSIC AND SONGS IN LANGUAGE LEARNING: TOOLS FOR LEARNER'S MOTIVATION.

It is known the importance of songs in human's lives. In fact, we are in contact with them all the time. Wherever you are, music and songs are there as well – at school, gyms, public places, and hospitals. It is not so easy to determine where it comes from, but men started trying to imitate the sounds of the birds and other animals. It is certain that people and songs have been living together since the very beginning of the world.

In the classroom, it could not be different. Songs have been used since Plato and Aristotle. Many philosophers used songs to teach their pupils. This kind of source has many positive points in English language learning – They automatically put language into a context, when used, they can give learners very important contact that lends a natural rhythm to words and phrases, helping language learners to improve their pronunciation, better comprehension skills, increase vocabulary and speech patterns. Music aids memory and brings culture alive. Traditional songs and rhymes offer a wealth of cultural heritage and lots of them are associated with holidays, places, and times gone by.

Research has shown the positive effects of classical music on the human's brain. In foreign language acquisition, songs are important because of those effects. According to Murphey (2002) “songs are relaxing. They provide variety and fun, and encourage harmony within oneself and within a group. Little wonder they are important tools in sustaining cultures, religions, patriotism, and, yes, even revolutions.” As we know, when students are having fun, they are more motivated to learn.

Researchers have said that pupils need to be motivated and relaxed to learn another language and the writer mentioned in the previous paragraph says:

Many of us have experienced with amazement how quick students are at learning songs. It is also a common experience to forget nearly everything we learn in another language except the few songs that we learnt. For a variety of reasons, songs stick in our minds and become part of us, and lend themselves easily to exploitation in the classroom. (Murphy, 2002 p. 6)

To sum up, we can say that teachers should consider using music and songs in their lesson plans. Moreover, we are sure that teachers have those powerful tools which provide students with a meaningful atmosphere. We argue that using songs in the classroom will not only help learners to develop their abilities more easily, but also make them feel confident to study the language. We suggest the book *o ensino da língua inglesa* (2001) by Holden and Rogers for those who want further information about the use of songs in the English language classroom.

#### DYNAMICS, GAMES AND COMMUNICATIVE ACTIVITIES.

We are sure about the effectiveness of the communicative activities in language learning. Furthermore, it can be considered one of the best ways to help students to practice and learn English. But what a communicative activity consist of? A communicative activity is one in which real communication takes place. That is, communicative activity belongs to a generation of classroom activities used in response to the need for a more communicative approach in the teaching of second or foreign languages.

There are many different kinds of activities such as *information gap, role-play, surveys, problem-solving, warmer, lead-in, spot-the-difference, pair-forming activities, drills*, and many other ones. Unfortunately, we do not have space to discuss more about them in this document.

Those so-called communicative activities play an important role because they provide students with interaction. That is, those activities help pupils to interact, negotiate meanings, work in pair or groups, and collaborate to achieve their goals. It is

an effective collaborative exchange of experiences, feeling, and ideas. Moreover, interaction provides students with motivation. Brown (2007, p. 212) puts it in this way:

Interaction is an important word for language teachers. In the era of communicative language teaching, interaction is, in fact, the heart of communication; it is what communication is all about. We send messages, we receive them, we interpret them in a context, we negotiate meanings, and we collaborate to accomplish certain purposes. And after several decades of research on teaching and learning languages, we have discovered that the best way to learn to interact is through interaction itself.

Of course, we have to keep in mind that students go to language school looking for opportunities to communicate using the language they have chosen to learn. Here, we are not talking about those tasks where students are expected to repeat a lot of sentences, questions, and words focusing on a particular part of function or language structure. In other words, we are not discussing about controlled-practice. Moreover, we advocate that students should use the language at their command in order to perform some oral tasks and avoid boredom. About speaking tasks, Harmer (2003, p. 87) says:

Getting students to have a free discussion gives them a chance to rehearse having discussions outside the classroom. Having them take part in a role-play at an airport check-in desk allows them to rehearse such a real-life event in the safety of the classroom. This is not the same as practice in which more detailed study takes place; instead it is a way for students to ‘get the feel’ of what communicating in the foreign language really feels like.

There are many possibilities and uses for activities in language courses or programs. It is known that many photocopiable books were developed to help teachers to find the most appropriate tasks for each and all levels, but teachers may use their creativity and adept or create new ones in order to provoke spontaneous communication in the classroom.

In conclusion, communicative activities, especially in communicative methods, are doubtless needed. Not only are they helpful and motivating, but also interactive. Students feel happy and confident when they can communicate among them in a

meaningful way. Therefore, communicative activities are a very important tool teachers should use in order to improve their lessons.

## USING TECHNOLOGY IN ELT TO MOTIVATE STUDENTS

We have no doubts that students learn best when they are motivated. Another way to have students engaged is by including technology in language learning. Researchers have shown the importance and how technology may help students to get motivated in order to learn best.

Some might say that technology can bring important benefits into the classroom. Not only students' learning may increase, but also their enthusiasm because students do not need to be passive recipients of knowledge; they become active participants in the learning process. The learning environment is positively affected by the use of technology-based instructional strategies. But how can we use technology in the classroom in order to have students interacting? To answer this question, we should define technology first.

When we talk about technology we are not only talking about computer, but also about many things from audiotapes passing throughout CDs, DVDs, overhead projection to video and, of course, computers.

According to Brown (2007) “when someone mentions technology in the language classroom, your first impulse is to think computer technology, mostly because computers have so pervaded our daily home and workplace contexts”. Taking into account the author's thought, we should consider the advantages of the use of those devices in the classroom such as computer and CDs, for instance.

If your teaching situation allows you to use computers and the likes – computer-based technology – in the classroom, you are a lucky teacher. But if, and there are some cases, in your school those tools are not available you may find or use “old” tools such as realia, other textbooks, visual aids, and students' textbooks – non-computer-based technology. About the self-made paper-based visual aids, Brown (2007, p.193) says:

With the dominance of computer media in our world today, you may think it's odd to think about some of the more traditional forms of visual aids. Posters, charts, and magazine pictures represent “old-fashioned” but effective teaching aids. If you are artistically inclined, you should consider trying your

hand at creating posters or charts for classroom use. Otherwise, a resource that many teachers find helpful is an assemblage of a couple of hundred magazine pictures that you can file and cross-index. Start with a pile of fairly recent magazines and pick out pictures (photos, diagrams, advertisements, etc.) that show people or objects large enough to be easily seen by all students in a classroom setting.

Although many people think in language learning in a very traditional way – students and the teacher in the classroom – many learners may feel motivated in learning or reinforcing their studies by themselves at home; that is, many students may practice the language they are learning by using CDs, DVDs, and CD-ROMs. Moreover, they can use computer-assisted language learning – CALL whenever they want, and sometimes, any time they desire, at home, for instance. That is one important role of the use of technology in language learning.

In fact, the possible uses of technology in the classroom are endless. Teachers should consider that pupils are used to “virtual life”. Furthermore, emails, sites, blogs, and the likes are part of the everyday activities students do. Yet, they use this technology by using English language as well. Brown (2007, p.203) suggest a project involving web page design where students may feel motivated in order to practice the language:

An interesting, motivating project for students in a class is to create their own class web page, complete with stories, interviews, biographies, accounts of field trips, restaurant reviews, photos, video clips, sound bites, and graphics. Self-made or collaboratively designed videos also offer students a chance to “ham it up” and make their own video creations.

In summary, we have no doubts about the importance of technology for the language classroom. Not only technology provides students with a great deal of resources, but also it may increase their interests and motivation in order to improve their progress and performance when speaking the language studied.

## SOME COMMENTS ABOUT MISTAKES IN ELT

So far we have talked about activities, interaction and motivation. When students are learning a new or a foreign language, they are subjected to make some mistakes. In fact, those mistakes are part of the language learning process. Even when we consider this part of the process, we have to keep in mind that it is important to know how to expose the “correct” way of speaking by correcting mistakes in a way that keeps learners motivated, because constant interruption to correct students may destroy the purpose of some activities. Moreover, it can make learners break their confidence and fail or simply give up.

Now we face tricky questions – what are the reasons for focusing on students’ errors? Why is it so important? To answer such questions, we should take into account what Ellis (1985, p. 15) states:

At first sight, it may seem rather odd to focus on what learners get wrong rather than on what they get right. However, there are good reasons for focusing on errors. First, they are a conspicuous feature of learner language, raising the important question of ‘why do learners make errors?’ Second, it is useful for teachers to know what errors learners make. Third, paradoxically, it is possible that making errors may actually help learners to learn when they self-correct errors they make.

Besides focusing on errors, we have to make something clear – the difference between error and mistake and the way correction should happen so that students will not feel demotivated. To Ellis (op. cit.):

How can we distinguish errors and mistakes? One way might be to check the consistency of learners’ performance. If they consistently substitute ‘contain’ for ‘contained’ this would indicate a lack of knowledge – an error. However, if they sometimes say ‘contain’ and sometimes ‘contained’, this would suggest that they possess knowledge of the correct form and are just slipping up – a mistake. Another way might be to ask learners to try to correct their own deviant utterances. Where they are unable to, the deviations are errors; where they are successful, they are mistakes. (p. 17)

Whatever it is – a mistake or an error – if we correct every time students make it, they will end up not trying to speak English anymore. We are not arguing that there is no place for correction in the classroom, but that we should consider the proper way of doing it, whether it is a peer-correction, teacher-correction, or self-correction.

It is known that there are many ways of correcting students' mistakes. Not only teachers should be aware of how to correct, but also do it in a non-obtrusive way. Learners must know they are expected to take the risk of making mistake or saying something in a wrong way when practicing the language. Harmer (2003, p. 94) says that:

As with any kind of correction, it is important not to single students out for particular criticism. Many teachers deal with the mistakes they heard without saying who made them. Of course, there are no hard and fast rules about correcting. Some teachers who have a good relationship with their students can intervene appropriately during a speaking activity if they do it in a quiet non-obtrusive way.

In few words, we would say that students do not attend class looking for mistakes; that is, they do not go to languages schools or programs to make mistakes and come back home without teacher's feedback, but considering mistakes as part of the process and taking into account that the way we correct them may negatively or positively affect students' progress is doubtless important.

## CONCLUSION

Even though every single teacher has his/her own way of performing in the classroom, after finishing this paper, we have taken into account that in the language teaching/learning one topic is doubtless significant – motivation.

Although many teachers and teachers' trainers know the important role played by motivation, it is not so easy to keep it during a course on even in just one lesson. In this article, we have just mentioned some topics about the importance and how to make motivation increase for the benefit of the whole process of language learning. Not only teachers have many resources, but also they are easy to find and use them in order to “keep the ball rolling”.

And finally, we discussed about the use of songs, dynamics, games, and technology in order to make the whole process much easier. We conclude by showing that mistakes are very important elements of this path to the learning of a foreign or second language.

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