Chapter Zero: Class Participation

By Khin Maung Zin

Teachers teaching English to learners of other languages have been trying to figure out why some students succeed in learning English while others do not. The search for the right answer has never led to success, and it seems that the perfect answer to the question will never be found. However, as language teachers, it is our duty to find out some factors that can affect the way our students learn, and help them to acquire the target language that they need in their academic field. Many an expert have come to agree that one of the most dominant factors that can boost students' interest (or confidence?) in learning a language, which in turn will speed up their study, is motivation.

Being abstract, the term 'motivation' is by all means difficult to define(Ur, 1996); however, it is worth taking a look at how experts classify the term, what people involved in English language teaching think of learner motivation and in what way motivation can help us upgrade our teaching- learning process.

Although many experts in the field of English language teaching have made distinctions between various sources of motivation, they all have, in their mind, one thing in common: motivation plays a significant role in learners' achievement in language learning (Gardner and Lambert: in Ur, P, 1996). It has been commonly accepted that some students learn a certain language because they *like to* (intrinsic motivation), while others do so because they *have to* (extrinsic motivation). Then it is reasonable to assume that most of our students are already motivated intrinsically or extrinsically, since they are studying in this university where English is the medium of instruction, and many parents would like to see their children as ABAC graduates. Whether it be 'intrinsic motivation' or 'extrinsic motivation', it is an undeniable fact that teachers can have a reasonable amount of influence on learner motivation; positively or negatively.

To be able to motivate our students in a positive way, we need to have a clear understanding of *what* we can do to 'create, foster and maintain' their motivation, and most importantly, *how*. Two sources of motivation, in my experience, accessible to the influence of teachers are 'clear goals' set up by the teachers for real-time classroom teaching-learning and 'pay-offs' (see Harmer, 1991) received by the students from the tasks they do.

'Goals' are usually set up in the name of 'Objectives' in our course outline and they are clearly spelled out in the 'Teaching Guidelines'. Also, 'pay-offs' are equally allocated under the heading of 'Mark Allocation'. Out of the six 'Course Components' covered in the English IV (Business) course in Assumption University, I select Class Participation, whose current allocation stands at ten marks, to be used as a motivation factor. Instead of depending on mere 'roll call', I think, we can do a lot more for the class participation component.

It is mentioned in our course outlines that the purpose of class participation is 'to encourage (motivate) students to be involved in various classroom activities and assignments' (goals). If students complete all assignments and 'comply with the instructions given by the teachers', they will receive the allotted marks (pay-offs). The teachers' responsibilities here

will be to provide the students with interesting materials and create favourable conditions (read activities and assignments).

In choosing assignments or activities to motivate my students to be engaged in the learning process inside or outside the classroom, the following questions are taken into account.

1. Are the assignments or activities of immediate use to students? In other words, are they directly or indirectly related to the quizzes and exams they are going to take?
2. Do students really understand the tasks they are doing and why they are doing them?
3. Is the time spent for the activities or assignments inside or outside the classroom worthwhile for students? In other words, are incentives worth the work they are asked to do?
4. Are the motivational materials and conditions within the reach of students? In other words, do we, teachers, realistically set the level of '*i*' in Krashen's famous '*i*+1'?

In this essay, I would like to share the approaches and materials I use to motivate my English IV students. Nearly all the assignments and tasks are to be completed outside the classroom by the students themselves and submitted the next day. Tasks and assignments are split up into ten; each worth one mark for class participation, totalling ten marks.

Chapter One: Reading Comprehension

Students are given a rather advanced passage of around 600 to 700 words to read and answer one or two reading comprehension questions. To be able to answer the questions 'clearly and correctly through appropriate language use, form and structure', students need to go through three critical stages: reading at a faster speed, skimming for main ideas and scanning for specific information. These three skills, if conducted well and practiced long enough, can help students tremendously to both answer reading comprehension questions and write short reports.

Reading at a faster speed:

Given the time constraint and the level of difficulty of the passage, it is quite a daunting task for my students to 'read quickly and comprehend' the text at the same time. In order to increase the reading speed, the students are taught how to 'practise' reading fast. In the classroom, to help my students understand ***'fixations'***, I chunk the following line into ***'sense groups'***- groups of words that make sense.

> If you watch / a reader's eyes, / you will see that / they do not move / continuously along the line / but cover the distance / in several jumps, / called ***fixations***.
> (Nuttall, 1996)

The students are encouraged to take in one fixation at a time, rather than read word by word, which most of my students tend to do. However, like Nuttall (1996) said, 'many students do not know the target language well enough to chunk effectively.' I start with an easier sentence-level and slowly move up to a more difficult paragraph-level that the students will encounter when they do practice writing or take the exams. When the students have a fair grasp of 'fixation' and 'sense groups', they are given several sentences to chunk into 'sense groups' outside the classroom as their assignments. I deliberately choose the sentences from the passages I have prepared for writing 1. They are asked to hand in carefully-chunked lines the next day. They are also told that each of them will be reading out at least one line and the feed-back will be given while reading.

Skimming for main ideas:

It is imperative that the reason why skimming is necessary for English IV students be known to them. To make them see the importance of skimming, they are first asked to read the newspaper article on 'L'Oreal's new product line' in the course book in the classroom. The objective of this task is not to read and understand every word, but to get the general ideas of each paragraph. I limit the time for reading and encourage them to use the technique they have acquired earlier from 'reading speed'. For starters, I usually provide the main ideas of the first one or two paragraphs. After the general ideas of all paragraphs are written down, it will not be so difficult for them to see the main ideas of the article: 'what' and 'how' of L'Oreal's new product line. Then the students are led to read the first part of the reading comprehension question, which usually asks for the main facts.

The students are then shown that if they can find out the main ideas of the passage, they know what question they should expect,this will increase their interest in skimming practices. The assignment is:

— The students take home two or three passages with them.
— Skim through the passage.
— Find out the main ideas.
— Make their **own questions**.
— Hand in the assignments the next class.

Corrections follow after randomly-picked students have read out the questions they have prepared in the next class. The rest of the class copies the questions.

Scanning for specific information:

The Scanning technique is probably one of the most important skills for the English IV students, partly because it is closely related to notes-taking from reading, the skills they need for comprehension questions and writing short reports. As marks allotted for 'content' are proportionally greater, students are required to provide a considerable amount of 'details' in their answer. I reuse the passages given earlier for 'skimming assignments' and old quiz questions for this assignment. With the questions in mind, students scan the passages and note relevant information for the answers, only in note form. In the next class, the notes are shown on OHP for the whole class to see. Then necessary corrections are discussed and marks for class participation are recorded.

Re-sequencing the text:

The main point of this practice is to train students to master 'organization', as it is as important as 'grammar'. Also, it is to help them understand the importance of the 'use of transitions' in paragraph writing so that they can organize their writing well. In class, I divide the students into two big groups. One group is given a jumbled text with 'transitions', and the other group, without. They are asked to put the sentences in the correct order. The students are later explained why it takes more time to re-sequence the jumbled text without 'discourse markers'. To make the task a bit more challenging, I later give my students three jumbled essays for their assignments. They are to re-arrange the sentences into correct order and also put the whole essay into four paragraphs: introduction, body 1, body 2 and conclusion.

Chapter Two: Editing and Proofreading

Many of my students score low marks in this area. One obvious reason is that finding errors in a paragraph is too difficult for them to handle. Besides, many of them seem to be de-motivated or intimidated when it comes to 'grammar'.

Sentence level:

To boost their confidence, I start with sentence level exercises. Again, all the sentences for this exercise are taken from the reading passages given to them earlier. After they have learned all types of errors from exercises in class, they are given five to six sentences with two to three errors in each, including clues; namely, pronouns, punctuations, participials, verb forms, tenses, singular/plural, subject-verb agreement, prepositions, word forms, verb-to-be. The next day, a few randomly-selected students explain the 'corrections' to the whole class, using the OHP. A point to note here is that the main objective of this assignment is not only to finish the task, but also to be able to analyze the errors.

Paragraph level:

Only after having built confidence in finding errors in sentences, the students are given paragraphs with 5 errors in each. They are given only one paragraph a day for five days. Again, the reason is for the students to be able to 'finish the task' and 'analyze the errors'. The students bring in the paragraphs with underlined-corrections and orally analyze and explain the errors they have found, usually at the beginning of the class. Corrections, if any, are discussed and marks are recorded.

Chapter Three: Data Interpretation

It is interesting to note that data interpretation is the most difficult for my students to write, but they seem to enjoy writing this kind of essay. They are happy to receive the assignments for which they are to create their own graphs on any topics they like. More than one week's time is given to prepare the graphs. Most of my students are highly motivated to do this assignment, probably because it is also intended for their first Oral Presentation, which carries 40 marks. The assignments are to be submitted ahead of their oral presentation.

Students' observation:

This activity is created to 'push' my students to participate in class while the oral presentation is in progress. They are told in advance that listening is part of the oral

presentation and they will lose some of the marks allotted for their oral presentation if they do not listen to the presentation being given by their classmates. In this activity, students carefully listen to the presentation in class. At the end of each presentation, they are called upon one at a time to ask one or two follow-up questions. The names of the students who ask *relevant* follow-up questions are recorded for class participation marks.

Chapter Four: Short Reports

I give this assignment as a kind of end-of-course report. The students are to write a very short report, evaluating the English IV course and my teaching performance. It is emphasized that they are free to voice their feelings derived from their close observations. Normal report writing format can be ignored; however, the report should be typed and should cover:

1. The problems and difficulties they may have encountered during the course.
2. The English IV course and teacher's teaching performance.
3. Precise suggestions to solve the problems and lessen the difficulties.

The finished assignments can be handed in any time before the final exams.

Chapter Five: Critical essay

To control the areas of the topics and the level of difficulty, I assign the topics. The responsibility of the students is to write down only the outlines of the essay. The points made must be convincing and there should be two parts: one supporting details and the other opposing details. Like data interpretation, this assignment really motivates my students, as they will be giving their second oral presentation on the assigned topic, another worthwhile incentive. The finished assignments are to be handed in before their oral presentations.

I believe that motivation, however difficult it is to define, is and will remain a pivotal factor in language learning while methodologies may come and go. If learners clearly see 'why' they are doing certain things and 'how' they can do them with some effort, they will certainly be interested in 'what' they are doing. The level of activities and tasks set only one level high can surely maintain learner motivation. Along with these interesting motivational materials and activities come learned-responsibilities, reduced inhibition and well-prepared oral presentations.

References:

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