

Arresting the decline in motivation of our students : An appraisal of their current and prior learning behaviours with the aim of discovering ways in which we can help facilitate a productive classroom

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**Arresting the decline in motivation of our students:  
An appraisal of their current and prior learning behaviours  
with the aim of discovering ways in which we can help  
facilitate a productive classroom.**

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## Introduction

A great deal of time in meetings is taken up with the subject of the decline in motivation of our students. The sources of these concerns are widespread; they come from students, parents, individual professors, indeed they are echoed right up to the people at the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology. To date, much of the advice and guidance we have received has been general in nature. It has usually taken the form of requests and demands that are often vague and lacking in inspiration. One often comes across missives containing advice such as:

*"Professors should take the time to make classes interesting."*

Sage advice, it must be said; however, even if we ignore the problems inherent in defining 'an interesting class,' we must also acknowledge that the difficulties in promoting and maintaining motivation are much more complex than simply trying to make one's classes '*interesting*.' This paper will attempt to discuss the present and past state of affairs in terms of our students' language learning behaviours and how these behavioural patterns influence motivation in the classroom. It will also aim to offer some personal insights and suggestions on how best to promote and maintain a level of motivation that not only helps facilitate the acquisition of English as a second language, but also encourages our students to engage more fully in their studies both now and in the future.

## Background

Most papers on motivation will begin with a definition. For the purposes of brevity, and an acknowledgement that the readers of this text are more than familiar with the subject; it would be expedient to simply refer to a familiar definition of motivation. Ellis, 1994:713, describes motivation as "*the effort which learners put into learning a second language as a result of their needs or desire to learn it.*" Most academics further divide the subject into intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. Ellis (1994) suggests that intrinsic motivation is derived from personal interests and inner needs, whereas, extrinsic motivation is derived from external sources such as material rewards. If we are to progress to a meaningful discussion on how to improve the '*efforts*' of our students, we now need to examine two issues:

- *How much effort do our students put into their studies?*
- *What can we do to increase and maintain efforts?*

In answer to the first question of how much effort our students put into their studies, one answer can be found in the great deal of disquiet over the perceived lack of endeavour of the modern student as evidenced in the concerns raised on this matter in the agendas and comments of committee meetings and seminars throughout the length and breadth of the country. All of which suggests, that not only is there a decline in motivation, but more importantly, there is also a demand that we need to do something to arrest this decline.

As we shall see in our discussions later, the matter of motivating students is a complex issue. One is often instructed in one way or another to keep our students 'happy.' Keeping students 'happy' is a relatively easy task to achieve; however, if they are to realize any improvements in their acquisition of English, we must ensure that they are also productive through the employment of an appropriate range of educational demands throughout their studies. The challenge we face is striking the right balance between the two. We need to choose a path that is directed at helping them reach the standards of linguistic competence and personal development that we set out for them in our educational policies.

Perhaps the biggest problem we face stems from the attitude and expectations of many of our students. Many, if not all of them, have just finished six years of English language instruction at junior and senior high schools. The last three years at senior high school, have in the main, consisted of arduous programmes of rote learning that included hours and hours of laborious copying regimes. This is often coupled with many hours of night time visits to cram schools to do more of the same. Whilst acknowledging that such programmes fully prepare the students for university entrance examinations, it is not unreasonable to suggest that they do not prepare them well for what they are likely to face in a language class at university. There is little doubt that a great number of our students who have been through such programmes are physically and mentally exhausted by the process. We are left with a situation in which the students feel that their herculean efforts at high school entitle them to something of an "academic break" when they reach university. It is almost as if they feel that they have reached a point where they have finished their studies, rather than the more conventional idea that university presents them with an opportunity to really start developing both academically and personally. If we are to motivate our students, it is imperative that we understand this phenomenon. This attitude can be found across all of the courses taught at university, but it is particularly true of students undertaking English language courses.

Before we can correct the attitudes and learning behaviour of our students, we must first understand what has lead them to their present way of thinking and behaving. We can make a start in this process by asking the following two questions:

- *What can we reasonably expect from our students?*
- *Are they likely to engage in the kind of efforts demanded by 'good learning practices?'*

It is no great secret that 'all behaviour is learnt.' Therein lies the answer (at least in part) to our first question above. Put simply, our students behave the way they have been taught to behave; a way, it must be said, is not always conducive to the successful acquisition of a second language. The notion that those studying a second language need to adopt the behaviour of the 'good language learner' is widely acknowledged as essential in second language acquisition studies. However, the plain truth is that the learning practices of our students do not match with those needed to attain 'good language learning behaviour.' Before we move on in this discussion, it might prove useful to

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refer to the definitions of some prominent academics in this area. Ellis (1994) identifies five major aspects of the good language learner:

- a concern for language form
- a concern for communication (functional practice)
- an active task approach
- an awareness of the learning process
- a capacity to use strategies flexibly in accordance with task requirements

These notions are reflected upon and refined by others in the field, including those of Naiman et al. 1978; Huang and Van Naersson, 1985, Wenden and Rubin, 1987, and Oxford, 1989. Oxford (1989:235) suggests: "*that good language learners use more and better learning strategies than do poor learners.*" Oxford (1989) contends that good language learners manage their own learning process through metacognitive strategies. Their attitudes and emotions are controlled, using affective strategies. They work with others using social strategies and utilise memory strategies to get information into memory and recall when required. Good learners employ new language directly with cognitive strategies and overcome knowledge limitations through compensatory strategies.

It is tempting to see Oxford's arguments and the culmination of ideas espoused in the aforementioned studies as nothing more than common sense. Furthermore, if we take into account the lack of universal agreement on the finer details of 'goodness' of a language learner, one might be convinced that there is nothing to gain by promoting good language learning practices. However, the above limitations notwithstanding, we still have available to us as educators, a wealth of information and research that provides us with sufficient evidence to strongly suggest that if our students are to become 'good language learners' we must encourage them to expand their limited ways of learning.

Of course, meaningful change cannot happen overnight. Many of our students will struggle with the notion of independent language learning behaviour. What makes our job of changing language learning behaviour in Japanese students difficult are the differences that can be found in the respective teaching methodologies in Western and Japanese foreign language classrooms. One major difference between Western and Japanese education systems can be found in the respective views on autonomy. Although autonomy is seen as beneficial and actively encouraged in the learning process in Western educational systems (indeed it is seen as one of the pre-requisites of a 'good learner') the same cannot be said of the education system in Japan.

The particular problem for the students of this institution and others in Japan to a lesser or greater degree is that many of them are learning English in two distinctly separate systems. Whilst much is made of the benefits of the respective systems, little consideration is given to the problems that arise for the students who are asked to operate simultaneously within them. It is an enormous leap from one setting to the next in terms of pedagogical philosophies encountered; aims pursued; teaching methodologies; and last but not least, the lingua-franca of each class, which can switch from mainly Japanese to mainly English depending on each individual educator. In the Japanese system,

they are asked to passively absorb directly instructed information, without comment or analysis, and yet an hour or a day later, they can find themselves in a situation where they are challenged to actively participate in the learning process via comment, debate, opinion and other forms of original oral and written production. This kind of situation presents an enormous challenge for even the most competent of language learners, let alone first and second-year university students, the majority of whom are not English Majors. There is a wealth of empirical and anecdotal evidence that speaks of the difficulty Japanese students experience in engaging in these kinds of activities, Locastro (1996), Sasaki (1996) and Law (1995) are but three of the scores of commentators to make such observations.

It should be noted at this point in our discussion that many educational institutions at all levels in Japan do promote some form of 'good language learning behaviour' with formal direction in good language learning strategy choice and good language learning behaviour instruction components. Indeed, great strides have been made in the communicative competency of Japanese students in these programmes. However, if we consider that the biggest influence on the learning process in all subject areas comes from Japanese teachers in primary, junior and senior high schools, it is not unreasonable to assume that the education they receive in these places will have the biggest influence on the students' choice of language learning behaviour, which it must be said are not ideally suited to the notion of the 'good language learner.' In truth, in the learning patterns of the vast majority of first and second-year classes, we are unlikely to find a high number of the recommended strategies mentioned earlier in regular use. On the contrary, we are more likely to encounter a very limited range of good learning strategies.

We should not leave this topic without stating that not all commentators see the traditional Japanese methods of English language education as deficient. For example, despite the antipathy many Western educators have against rote learning, there is evidence of its effectiveness. In a comparative study of American and Japanese students on attitudes and abilities to rote learning, Tinkham (1989) found that Japanese students not only showed a more positive attitude to memorisation, they also scored significantly higher than their American counterparts in their performance in recalling and recognising twelve recently memorised words in a new language. Furthermore, although American students showed a more positive attitude towards the creative activity of writing a short description, the difference in results was not significantly different to those of the Japanese students. The implication according to Tinkham, is that teachers and curriculum developers should realise that many students are not only good at rote learning, they appear to enjoy it. We would do well to remember this when we are planning our syllabi and classes.

Tinkham's observations notwithstanding, many professors are left with students who because of their perceived notions of having 'finished' their studies and the fact that they do not possess the skills and good learning practices for success in second language acquisition, exhibit very low levels of motivation. If this is not evident at the beginning of a course, they soon show sign of disinterest if the correct measures to help them adapt to a "new way" of studying are not implemented.

### The Creation and Maintenance of Motivation in the Classroom

Now it is time to address the second and perhaps the most important of our two questions set out at the beginning of this paper:

- *What can we do increase and maintain productive efforts in our students?*

This issue is extremely complex because of the variance in educational goals between the systems referred to in most of the previous studies on 'good language learning behaviour' and those found in Japanese educational institutions. Furthermore, the mental processes involved in language acquisition are little understood. Evidence of this can be found in psychological studies; one such study carried out by Black (1991: 141) claims that we are able only to give a vague account of our thought processes.

The challenge for us as educators is to successfully devise ways in which our students can engage in and expand the type of learning behaviours that can improve motivation and language acquisition whilst not ignoring their cultural characteristics including past and present learning behaviour. There is no quick solution to this quandary. Using prescriptive methods to analyse and determine strategy choice without due consideration to cultural differences is fraught with danger. LoCastro (1994) warns that some learning behaviour assessment systems may not be sensitive to the concerns of Japanese students and consequently may not give a clear picture of the nature of their learning approaches. Nevertheless, one way to start is to simply ask the students about the way they learn or have learned a language. This can be done through a simple structured questionnaire, or through a dedicated 'Learning Behaviour' course of study designed to introduce students to the benefits of good learning behaviour in terms of increasing both competence and motivation.

To further our understanding of our students' motivational attitudes we should ask ourselves: 'What is the purpose of language learning?' An examination of this topic can help greatly in creating motivation through appropriate instruction and evaluation. Traditionally, these endeavours have been focused on the relatively narrow notions surrounding the reproduction of language form and its subsequent evaluation. Scant attention has been paid to other aspects of language education such as self-development and self-awareness and its relationship to the promotion of motivation. Even the more modern concept of 'communicative competence' instruction ignores these ideas. Both approaches pay little attention to the importance of self development and self-awareness despite the plethora of authors who strongly advise that language learning courses should be more than simply concentrating on language form alone. Indeed some like Hughes (2002) goes so far as to say that "speaking is not naturally language focused; it is people focused." Byram (1997) acknowledged such an approach in a rationalization of the fostering of critical self-awareness skills. Byram suggested that these skills are essential if students are to understand not only themselves, but also the thoughts and actions of fellow classmates. If we are to truly understand our students, and at the same time help them understand themselves and their place in the world, we would do well to heed the advice of Byram and others.

How do we take what we have discussed above and translate it into the promotion of motivation in our students in and out of the classroom? Before we embark on answering this question and offer up some suggestions on creating good learning behavior, we should first ask ourselves: Is the balance between our research and classroom activities appropriate? It may seem a strange question at first, given the amount of research referred to in this paper; however, there is little doubt that too much focus on our research activities can lead us to forget about the importance of classroom motivation and maintenance. A good maxim to follow is that all our research activities should be aimed at a practical application in the classroom.

Taking all of the above points into consideration it's time to offer some proposals to help create and maintain motivation in our students. First and foremost, we must find out as much as we can about our students with regard to their past and present learning behaviours. This can be done

by simply asking them, either informally or by carrying out a class survey in the first weeks of a semester. We should also take the time to ascertain if any of our students suffer from medical conditions that are likely to hinder their progress. Broken arms are easy to see and relatively easy to deal with, but we must ensure we are aware of any 'Learning Difficulties' they may suffer from. The misinterpretation of a medical condition of a particular student as 'laziness' can have a disastrous effect on the motivation of not only that student, but also on how the rest of class perceive you. If you are seen as uncaring, it is unlikely that your students will put any efforts into their studies.

Once you have a grasp of the situation with your students, be sure to implement changes to their learning behaviour slowly, as they are likely to be new concepts for most of them. Motivating students is not simply a question of keeping them 'happy' with 'interesting' 'easy' classes; it is important to make reasonable and appropriate demands of them in order for them to make progress. Make goals that encourage good learning behavior, for example, when you set an examination or an assignment, devise undertakings that don't rely on memory skills alone-this also has the advantage of cutting down on cheating. Take an interest in your students, get to know their names, where they are from, what club they belong to etc. It may seem trite at first glance, but knowing a professor has an interest in a class, makes students feel that what they do is important; this fact is borne out by the positive comments recorded in the class surveys we carry out every semester. Ensure your evaluations methods are well explained at the beginning of a course, they should be consistent and continuous. Leaving evaluation to the end of a course encourages the students to switch off until July or February. The more you know about your students the better, focus on what your students can do, not on what they can't do. This does not mean that you have to lower your expectations and/or your educational values, far from it; it simply means that knowing more about your students allows you a greater chance of creating classes that are appropriate and motivational.

## Conclusion

As a national education institution, we create lofty ideals for our students to adhere to in our curriculum and admission policies. If we are to make sure that our students' achievements reflect those ideals, we must do much more than go through the motions in our teaching and evaluation activities. There is no real doubt that creating and maintaining optimum levels of motivation plays a key part in achieving this aim.

In order to make the right kind of choices in our methodology that are more likely to promote and maintain a high level of motivation, and improve the linguistic competence of our students, we should be prepared, to not only take into account their past learning behaviours, but also endeavour to take the appropriate action to ensure that they adopt language learning behaviour designed to increase a deeper engagement in their studies.

It is vital that we make ourselves and our students aware of the notion of good language learning behaviour and its effect on motivation in the classroom. Improving linguistic competence and student engagement should not be limited to simply weaning students off their present learning behaviour and replacing it with new ones, as that suggests there is 'something wrong' with their present procedures. Instead, we should choose methodologies, syllabi, strategy instruction and materials that take into account not only our perceived weaknesses of them, but also their strengths, attitudes and cultural background. Indeed, this must be done with a patient committed ethnographic outlook. It may well be the case that Japanese students and teachers with their aversion to autonomy will not be able to engage in self-assessment, or be equipped to deal with a wide range

of strategy use. Educators may have to contemplate the implementation of a compromise that will include some form of teacher-centred direct instruction. Moreover, the number of choices may be very limited in range depending on the compatibility with the major educational goals and skills of the students. The more we know about our students, and the more they know about themselves and each other, the better chance of increasing the engagement and motivation of our students. The Educator on location is in the best position to decide what is likely to increase the efforts in their students, having said this, we can with some confidence say that, the chances of success will be greatly enhanced if we give due consideration to all of the arguments laid out earlier.

If there is one message to take from this paper, it is that the keys to motivating students do not lie in directives from above. Whilst they have a contribution to make, they cannot be the main driver in improving motivation no matter how well intentioned or designed. The most productive solutions to this particular problem can only be found in the classroom; we need only look for them.

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## 要 旨

### 学習動機の低下をいかに抑制すべきか —実り多い教室作りに向けた学習行動履歴の肯定的評価—

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キーワード：学習動機、自律性、良い外国語学習方法、エスノグラフィーの視点

この論文は、日本の大学の英語に関する授業において、学生が学習意欲をどのように維持し続けるか、という長年の懸案に対する洞察と答えを探求するものである。まず学生の現在と過去の外国語学習方法に着目し、それに関する考察を行う。その結果は、教授法やシラバス作成法、ラーニング・ストラテジーの指導法、資料作成法等を教員が選択する際の有効なガイドとなるであろうと主張する。

また、そのプロセスにおいて、学生の背景にある文化の違いに慎重であるべきだと指摘する。この論文の最も重要なポイントは、学生の学習意欲向上の鍵は外部にあるわけではなく、実際の授業と学生の中に探し当てることができる、という点である。教員には、それを探求するためのたゆまぬ努力が不可欠である。