

Motivation: an Affecting Factor in Language Learning



N. Vadivel

Assistant Professor of English, SKPEC, Tiruvannamalai, Research Scholar,
Bharathiar University

Email: vadivel.narayanan@skpec.in

Albert P' Rayan

Professor of English, KCG College of Technology

ABSTRACT

English has become important in the academic and professional life of an individual. The art of communicating well in English is a challenging task. The steps and strategies adopted by the students and some teachers make the learning of English difficult and uninteresting. The whole world has become a global market and multiple businesses have the aim of achieving targets, thereby, the technology experts and professionals face new challenges in communication in their day to day life. So, attaining success in this vying environment depends not only on acquiring technical knowledge, but also on honing their communication skills. English has turned into a universal language, and its presence and value in the world has expanded enormously in the past decades. Rural students at the tertiary level, lack good communication skills in English and, as a result, become unemployable even if they are knowledgeable in their technical domain. The scenario prevailing in some of the rural engineering colleges, especially in Tamilnadu, is deplorable. The students who graduate from those institutions after spending four years of study come out without learning the art of speaking in English even after studying courses such as Technical English and Communication Skills for three semesters. The aim of the paper is to discuss the main problem, i.e. lack of motivation to learn English. The paper discusses how motivation is an affecting factor in language learning. It also focuses on the theories of motivation and how a teacher can sustain the motivation among the learners.

Key words: Motivation, Communication skills, Language learning.

Introduction:

An article in *The Hindu*, a leading English daily, carried a report about a survey done by the company Aspiring Minds on the English learning level among engineering graduates of India. The survey mentioned that it had analyzed the English skills of over 55,000 aspiring engineers in 250

different engineering colleges and stated that “around 36 per cent of engineering graduates are unable to read formal reports and find information out of them, even when the information is given clearly.” The report also added that Tamil Nadu figured as the last on the employability index. “This is because the engineering graduates who come out every year are not able to converse

in English". The study concluded that most of them are not confident and they lack motivation.

Background:

This report prompted the author to do a research on the reasons that remain as an obstacle for the students of engineering colleges especially from the rural areas to get employment. English is the most commonly used languages in the corporate world. Proficiency in English is one of the most important employability skills. So knowledge of English is much sought after in the corporate world. But the scenario prevailing in some of the engineering colleges, especially in rural areas, which have enrolled rural students is not conducive for students to learn English effectively. As a result, the students are not recruited by companies. One of the reasons found by the author is the interest level or the motivation level of the rural engineering college students towards learning English.

The author is currently working as an Assistant Professor of English at a rural Engineering College in Tiruvannamalai. The majority of students who are doing their engineering are from a rural background. They study courses such as Technical English I and Technical English II in their first year and Communication and Soft skills in their third year of their degree program. Though they have studied English for over 12 years during their schooling they have not learnt English. When they were asked to respond to a few writing or speaking tasks

they did not respond properly. Quite a few were interested as they had received education from CBSE or Matriculation schools. The majority remained passive or they copied or imitated their peers' response. When they were questioned to give a reason for remaining passive, they gave the following answers:

- (i) We may commit mistakes while writing or speaking
- (ii) Our classmates will mock us if we don't speak well.
- (iii) We have stage fear.
- (iv) We don't basic grammar.
- (v) We have never had an opportunity to converse in English.
- (vi) We do not know how to form coherent sentences.
- (vii) We are not interested in English.

The points mentioned above made the author decide that they are not rightly motivated to learn the language. There is no doubt that motivation plays an important role in attaining success in learning a second or foreign language. Motivation is one of the important aspects of second language acquisition. As Ellis summarizes, "the most successful learners will be those who have both a talent and a high level of motivation for learning".

Theories on Motivation:

The success of any action usually depends on the extent to which individuals strive to

attain their purpose, along with their desire to do so. In general, people refer to this psychological factor – the impulse that generates the action – as motivation. As the term itself indicates, it is a “motive force”, something that prompts, incites or stimulates action. According to *The Short Oxford English Dictionary*, motivation is “that which moves or induces a person to act in a certain way; a desire, fear, reason, etc., which influences a person’s volition: also often applied to a result or object which is desired.”

Williams and Burden (1997: 120) see motivation as “a state of cognitive and emotional arousal, a state which leads to a conscious decision to act and gives rise to a period of sustained intellectual and/or physical effort”. Thus the intellect and affect combine with volition and perseverance to result in what is known as motivated behaviour. The same idea is conveyed in different words by R.C. Gardner, who seems to explain the term with the precision of mathematical demonstration: motivation is a combination of effort plus desire to achieve a goal plus favourable attitudes towards the goal to be accomplished (Gardner, 1985:11).

Motivations are usually classified as instrumental motivation, integrative motivation, intrinsic motivation and extrinsic motivation. One of the best-known and historically significant studies of motivation in L2 learning was carried out by Robert Gardner and Wallace Lambert (1972). “An integrative motive is employed when learners wish to integrate themselves within the culture of the second group, to

identify themselves with and become a part of that society” (Brown, 2002: 153-154). This kind of motivation stressed the learner’s desire to learn a language to be integrated successfully into the target language community or the target language settings. In contrast, instrumental motivation refers to the learner’s desire to learn a language for utilitarian purposes, such as meeting the requirements for school or university graduation, getting a good job, requesting higher pay based on language ability, reading technical material, translation work or achieving a higher social status, thus it is a more functional reason for language learning.

Deci and Ryan (1985) put forward another influential dimension in classification - intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, which is widely cited nowadays. Intrinsic means “from within”. People are intrinsically motivated not because accomplishing the activity they do bring a reward, but because doing the activity itself is a reward. The feeling of competence and self-determination are significant factors of intrinsic motivation. Thus, learning is driven by the learner’s intrinsic motivation-curiosity and interest. Learners with intrinsic motivation learn the foreign language not because the outside reward, but the learning activity itself is the reward for them.

Extrinsic motivation, on the other hand, is carried out in anticipation of a reward from outside and beyond the self, which typically can be money, prizes, grades, and even certain types of positive feedback. It focuses on something external to the learning

activities and extrinsic motivation is encouraged by outside forces.

As the theories state, a student may get motivated intrinsically or extrinsically. The approach by a teacher to make the students learn the second language is an important factor in motivating them. A teacher should kindle the intrinsic motivation of a student thereby leading him from a dependent stage to an independent stage.

Teachers' role in sustaining motivation:

As a language teacher, a few methods were tried out by me for some time to make the students get interested in learning the second language. It failed to reach the desired result, most of the times. The inspiration to select and do a research on motivation became fervent after a discussion with my research supervisor on his research formula MAP. It is an acronym coined by Albert P'Rayan combining the learning factors Motivate, Activate and Participate. According to Encarta dictionary the word motivate means to make somebody feel enthusiastic, interested and committed to something. A great teacher is a person who can motivate their students. He also suggested the following points to motivate students:

- o A great teacher is a motivator. Before they motivate others they should motivate themselves. It means they should be enthusiastic
- o A great teacher is a role model to their students. If they want their students to speak well, they should be articulate.

They should possess 5 Cs: Confidence, Clarity, Conviction, Commitment and Courage. They should inspire their students

- o A great teacher establishes a rapport with their students. They should attract their students towards them. The more the students like the teacher, the better they learn and participate in activities
- o A great teacher uses strategies that do not threaten the students. It is very important to learn and practice a language in a non-threatening environment.

After reading some research papers on motivation and discussions with some of the teachers of English, I tried a few activities that really interested and motivated the students. To name a few:

- a) Using interesting videos and getting responses
- b) Using vocabulary games
- c) Using pictures from newspapers
- d) Using stories and articles from newspapers

Selection of videos:

Videos from the YouTube have become a great resource for a language teacher. A pictorial video named "THE STRANGER" with English subtitles was of great use for me. The story is about a stranger who visits a village for staying there for the night. The words and sentences used in the subtitles are related to real-life situation, which is

important for a language learner, especially for our students from rural areas who are expected to use those sentences. After every scene questions were asked to the students. At the beginning they replied with single word answers. As soon as they got motivated and interested in the story, some more questions were asked by me to which they should answer in sentences. Some were passive as usual while some came forward to answer. As the story moved on, the interesting scene sequence caught the attention of the students. Then after three scenes I asked one of my students to narrate the scene. He did it. Though there were many errors in his utterances, he had a sense of satisfaction.

By relaxing the norm of using grammatically correct English, students started to participate without any hesitation. Later, one by one was asked to give a description after playing the video to which most of them responded positively. Though perfection could not be achieved in the target language the main aim of motivating them was achieved. The class was different for them from the routine classroom lecture. After class hours they approached and asked me to share many more videos of that nature that would facilitate their language learning and sustain their motivation for learning the language. Thus, the prime aim of motivation was attained. The theories mentioned above turned out to be true.

Using Word games:

Most of the teachers would have known about the most effective vocabulary builder

in the English language – the book “Word Power Made Easy” by Norman Lewis. This book was used by me for making students learn words and use it in sentences later. The chapter, which was used for motivating the students was “How to test your present vocabulary”. The chapter consists of testing our vocabulary range, a test of our verbal speed and test of verbal responsiveness. The reason for selecting a vocabulary exercise is also given as an answer in the same chapter.

“Words are the instruments by means of which men and women grasp the thoughts of others and with which they do much of their own thinking. They are the tools of thought.”

The first test contains about 60 words with five options for each word to be chosen as the best suitable synonym. The students became interested in doing the task given. Those who were passive in previous classes got interested in doing this and are certainly motivated. The students also learnt new words and internalized them by making sentences. The second exercise is given three minutes for one to mark S-same, D-different and O-opposite for a list of 30 words. The words given in the book are of interest and challenging to a college student from a rural background. The next task is to write 125 words starting with the letter ‘D’ in three minutes. These types of exercises and task certainly motivate the students to learn and use English language. The task set by the teacher certainly plays a vital role in motivating the second language learners.

Using Photos from newspapers:

During my classes a few pictures from English newspapers, such as The Hindu and New Indian Express, were used. Once, a picture of an auto rammed by a lorry was shown to the students. The students were encouraged to speak on whatever comes to the mind while seeing the picture. They replied by saying the things that they infer from the picture. One spoke about the colour, whereas another pointed to the number of public and policemen on the picture. Their ideas were developed and a topic was given to them for discussion in which they spoke about road safety. Another group had their discussion on “Who is responsible for accidents - Public or the government.” This activity motivated them to use the target language. When a discussion was held about the activity at the end of the session, most of the students expressed their thoughts with confidence and a renewed interest to learn was noticed from their faces. That was definitely a sign of motivation.

Using stories and articles from newspapers:

Selecting an article to be used in English class plays an important role in motivating the students.

An article in “The Hindu” newspaper titled “Punyakoti reimagined” was read by me a few months back. The name “punyakoti” interested me to search for the name and the story behind it. Then I got a chance of reading the wonderful old folktale “The Story

of Punyakoti, the cow and Arbhuta, the tiger.” This story was read out aloud in the class and the students were asked to retell the story with the language and vocabulary they have in store. They did it because the story inspired them. Motivational stories in English are found to be of great use for teaching and motivating students to learn the second language.

Conclusion:

Though there are no magical formulas for making students learn a language, teachers can devise motivational strategies that are suitable for a specific set of students and can create a positive impact on the language learners. This paper has briefly stated some theories of motivation and how a teacher can sustain students’ motivation to learn a language like English by adopting suitable strategies.

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