Keeping English Learners Motivated

By Mary A. Frost
Georgia State University
frost.marya@gmail.com

The ability to create dynamic and engaging lessons which are designed to teach content as well as language is a unique and challenging skill. It is sometimes the case that instructors get so caught up in the complexities of language and discrete concepts that they forget that authenticity in communication and cognitively complex tasks are what make language learning engaging for students and motivate them to continue their education. As teachers we always have a wide assortment of students in our classes, with wide ranges of aptitudes, L1 proficiencies, diverse sociocultural factors, and of course varied levels of motivation to learn. According to Dornyei and Csizer (1998) "without sufficient motivation, even individuals with the most remarkable abilities cannot accomplish long-term goals, and neither are appropriate curricula and good teaching enough to ensure student achievement" (203). And of course, as they also point out in their 1998 study, motivation is capable of making up for deficiencies in other areas, such as aptitude, when strong enough. Motivation is a crucial element to a student's successful education and teachers need to have a thorough understanding of how best to access that drive within their students.

Since it is our job as educators to create measurable levels of learning growth in our students, the challenge of motivating learners who lack motivation seems most imperative. In addition, motivation is the only characteristic of successful learners upon which teachers may have any degree of influence or impact. In Dixon's 2012 study he identifies motivation as one of the four major characteristics of a successful L2 learner. The other three characteristics are aptitude, proficiency in L1, and sociocultural factors. Sparks (2009) also found that motivation in L2 accounted for a 9% difference in reading comprehension levels and 4% of the variation within speaking and listening activities. A clear benefit can be seen in working to increase student motivation.

How can teachers keep students motivated or inspire motivation where there is otherwise none? It is easy to say that looking out for students and showing them that their teachers are genuinely interested in their wellbeing is one way to increase their desires to achieve in school. Most teachers know that looking out for students' wellbeing is categorically correct behavior, but *how* should teachers accomplish this task? At the right time and place it is certainly beneficial to explicitly tell students that instructors value their opinions and care about their experiences, but showing is better than telling. In order for instructors to *authentically* demonstrate sincere interest and concern, educators must build opportunities for demonstrating the legitimacy of their care into daily interactions by incorporating them into unit designs. In order to craft such a unit, teachers need to make sure their designs incorporate two important concepts: authenticity of communicative tasks and assessments and a critical pedagogy. Once a unit is designed under this lens, teachers must set the scaffolding for success in language learning.

Authenticity

Once the teacher has an idea of the context of the classroom and what content needs to be taught, using the strategy of backwards design the teacher should construct opportunities for authentic communicative tasks as assessments. While it is fair to say that in every class there is going to be a variety of students, some of which lack motivation, it is generally believed that students are *more* motivated when the subject of learning is not perceived to be language, but some other content. According to D'Anglejan and Tucker (1975) "the student can most effectively acquire language when the task of language learning becomes incidental to the task of communicating with someone…about some topic…which is inherently interesting to the student" (284). Using the content as a vehicle for language instruction, teachers can accomplish a great deal more because, if correctly designed, the student perception is that there is an actual purpose for communication. Similarly, Harper and de Jong (2004) also point out that "because ELLs are simultaneously acquiring content and language proficiency, teachers are responsible for planning both conceptual and linguistic development for these students in order to meet grade level standards" (158). Success in helping English Learners to reach state standards is accomplished by integrating content and language teaching so that there is a purpose for language application.

Authentic, communicative assessments will have a practical element to them. Instead of assigning a persuasive essay to a student, a more authentic approach would be to have a student write a persuasive essay or speech and actually submit it to, for example, the principal or whatever other authority might be applicable to the assignment. Teachers can make journaling more authentic by responding to student entries. This action changes an exercise into a communicative act and student response will become more prolific. When the student knows that

the assignment is for something beyond being only read by the teacher for a grade, motivation to perform well will increase.

Making class activities both communicative and authentic can make a drastic difference in student motivation as it appeals to student relationships with L2 speakers, L2 community, and L2 language. For example, in Daod's 1998 study, he examined a class of graduate level medical students at Damascus University in an English writing class. The students had very low motivation and did not consider themselves to be skilled writers, but the students were required to take the course to complete their medical degrees. When the teacher began a communicative letter exchange project with a university in the United States, students became intensely motivated to write. Students drafted essays on a topic of their choosing, but later exchanges became about cultural or world issues. Initial problems included sweeping generalizations with little support, often criticizing the American government or policies. Students worked carefully to learn how to communicate appropriately to their task, incorporating pragmatic knowledge, and despite not having any wish to integrate into American society, the class still wished to be perceived by the American students as good writers of English. In the end, they had markedly improved linguistic self-confidence and interest in writing in English. Also, by interacting with actual L2 speakers in authentic forms of communication, the Syrian students' perceptions of Americans and American culture improved. Once a genuine, communicative practice became part of their language routine, motivation was enhanced.

It is also important to note that communicative competency should be stressed over discrete grammatical items. A person can have a great deal of knowledge about grammatical forms, but be incapable of getting a point across if they cannot comprehend pragmatic functions in varied situations (Hymes, 1966; Celce-Murcia, Dornyei, & Thurrell, 1997). As a teacher with

standards to meet, it is easy to become overly concerned with the discrete, "small picture" elements of language, but ultimately the purpose of teaching English is for students to use it to communicate. Certainly there are times and places for formative discrete grammatical assessments, but the ratio of discrete items to communicative "large picture" items should be dramatic. Assessments should be conducted on the stressed elements of each task. If the emphasis is communicative competence, then the teacher should not nit-pick discrete errors, so long as the overall meaning is comprehensible.

<u>Critical Pedagogy</u>

Just as authentic forms of communicative assessments increase student motivation, designing units with a critical approach will further enhance student interest in the topic and therefore increase motivation to communicate. The concept of backwards design is vital in the construction of a unit of work. Using this strategy, teachers can design assessments which are the types of authentic communicative tasks which motivate students to work and ultimately learn. When one considers a puzzle, it helps to have an idea of what the fully constructed picture looks like before one starts putting the puzzle together. When the end result can be seen, one can have a more informed idea of where to lay pieces and of how different pieces should fit together. This concept is the same with constructing a unit and backwards design. When a teacher starts at the end and has the final project created first, that teacher can work backward from there and design the unit with ideal sequencing and scaffolding in order to facilitate the most effective learning. More intentional design choices are possible using this method and one's overall design will be more cohesive.

Influenced heavily by the writings of Paolo Freire, the concept of a critical pedagogy asks students to recognize and deconstruct societal power constructs and hegemony, make

connections, and challenge those constructs through their class work and projects. Students must recognize how individual experiences and lives connect to larger issues and the social contexts within which they are embedded, helping them learn how to think critically. Freire was a critical educator, typically recognized as being a part of the social learning perspective. He advocated for the practice of students realizing their consciousness and engaging in praxis, or the knowledge needed to take action against oppression (Freire, 1970). The banking model of teaching, where classes are dominated by teachers and knowledge is deposited into the minds of students is an outdated model in which students can have no control of their education. Instead of this banking model, students and teachers should interact on a dualistic level, where students have power to direct their own learning. A critical approach makes learning more authentic for students because they are able to learn and study subjects which interest them. In addition, asking critical questions of students trains their brains to make connections in every subject across every walk of life. The ability to think critically is an important life skill that is needed in every adult person, but it is often overlooked in the classroom. For language minority students in particular, analyzing societal power constructs, which often place minorities in areas of marginalization, should provide students with avenues for expressing frustration and voices to empower them.

What steps can teachers take to design their units in a critical way? Teachers should consider the issues or history surrounding the literature they plan to use for the unit. For example, *The House on Mango Street* by Sandra Cisneros (1991), a book in which the main character, Esperanza, deals with many issues related to the power of language as well as struggling with issues of identity, could be related to some much larger issues in history and current events. Once the teacher is able to chisel out those core concerns within the literature, the teacher can then draw parallels with other pieces of literature, with history, or with current

events. For English Learners in particular, the discussion of the power of language is deeply rooted in their everyday experience. They will have quite a bit to say on the topic.

A teacher could incorporate history by discussing the Los Angeles School Blowouts of the civil rights movement, which Chicano(a) high school students organized protests against the pervading school policy of "English only" education and the filtering of native Spanish-speaking students into lower tracks of education. The debate on the benefits or disadvantages of bilingual education could be a subject for consideration. Connect it to current events by discussing Proposition 203 and the events with educational policy in Arizona. This is only a sample, but explicitly showing students that literature connects to larger issues and concepts will enhance the quality and authenticity of assessments, student interest, and ultimately, student motivation.

Scaffold for Language

Once the instructor has accomplished the overall concept for a unit, incorporating critical ideas and authentic and communicative assessments, the stage is set to get students engaged and motivated to work. However at this point, it is very important that the instructor incorporate some scaffolding to support students of various English language proficiencies. There is no better way to kill student motivation than to overwhelm (or underwhelm, for that matter) a student with language or tasks which exceed reasonable expectations. For motivational purposes, to keep students engaged, it is critical that teachers differentiate to the level of the student and build a sturdy foundation which supports multiple language levels. Moreover, differentiation should be tailored to fit each class. There are so many contexts within which students may be learning English and teachers likely have more than one class they teach. Each group may require a varied scale of differentiation, depending on who is in the class, but it is important to note that most every activity or task can be given a slight change to provide more or less

scaffolding. For example, for all assessments which are graded in accordance with a rubric, teachers should incorporate a sliding scale based on student language competency scores in each of the four language domains. In this way, all students will participate in the same activities and tasks, but the language demands and rigor will always correspond to individual student needs. All students will be challenged appropriately on both linguistic and cognitive levels while all learning the same material.

In order to scaffold effectively, it is essential that educators have an accurate understanding of the science behind second language acquisition. A common misconception of second language acquisition, or SLA, is that mere exposure to language, as with first language acquisition, will result in language learning (Harper, 2004). However, this is not how SLA works. The contexts of second language acquisition are much more varied than those of first language acquisition. There are so many different contexts within which a student may be learning a second language: as a foreign language in their own country, as an immigrant coming to a new country, as a refugee fleeing their home country, as a young learner, as an adult learner, and a variety of many other possibilities. So much about second language acquisition is dependent on the context of the situation. In each of these contexts, student motivations will have vast differences and students' stages of cognitive development will have major influence on learning (Lightbrown & Spada, 2006). It is important that teachers understand the impact that age can have on language learning in order to utilize cognitive function of one's students in the best possible way, setting students up for success.

In the context of the classroom, when considering how to teach a second language to one's students, the age of the students should certainly make an impact on one's methods, approach, and type of scaffolding. Young learners have been shown to "have the ultimate

attainment advantage" but older learners demonstrate efficiency and rate advantages" (Dixon, 2012). In essence, children and adults simply have different tools available to them which teachers can utilize in order to scaffold and increase effective learning. It is the teacher's role to highlight student strengths, shape lessons, and scaffold to the needs of the individual to produce the maximum benefit for each learner. It is also important to note that the notion that past the age of puberty people are incapable of truly acquiring language is proven false every day. The difference in child learning and adult learning is simply a difference in learning strengths and strategies which are based on age.

It is important to provide degrees of scaffolding for students so that they not only understand the class, but are also challenged enough to grow linguistically (Maybin, Mercer, & Stierer, 1992). ESOL teachers must become skilled designers of language objectives for every lesson, and those objectives must challenge students' language skills just enough to help them grow. In areas of the unit where the class is teacher-centered, it is important that the teacher tempers his or her language to be comprehensible to the class. While comprehensible input is important to consider, the bulk of all classes should be student-centered and focus on comprehensible output.

Comprehensible output is the idea that learning takes place when the speaker encounters a gap in linguistic knowledge during communication with another speaker (Swain & Lapkin, 1995). In contrast to the comprehensible input hypothesis, the comprehensible output hypothesis places the emphasis on language production. When a student is using language interactively with another speaker, he or she will notice gaps of knowledge once he or she attempts to communicate an idea and lacks vocabulary or knowledge of specific grammatical

structures (Swain & Lapkin, 1995). Once the student notices these gaps, the student may be able to modify his or her output to communicate his idea and learning occurs. Opportunities for this type of learning occur most easily within authentic, communicative assessments. The learning comes in the making and correcting of one's own mistakes during language production, but it is equally important that the students are able to understand the teacher and one another in class. This kind of practice which incorporates the negotiation of meaning between speakers is emphasized in an approach which stresses the use of communicative tasks. The fostering of a positive and safe learning environment is equally critical, so that students feel unashamed about making mistakes in communicative tasks. These mistakes are vital to effective learning.

When considering issues of communicative competence, it is important for educators to consider the differences between BICS and CALPS language. BICS, or Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills, refer to basic conversational skills students use to communicate in informal exchanges. CALPS, or Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency, is academic language used in the context of the classroom as well as basic literacy-related skills, such as reading and writing (Cummins, 1986). It is estimated that it takes a student 5-7 years to acquire CALPS in a second language *if* the student is literate in the first language. In cases where the student is *not* literate in his first language, it can take even longer, as the student has no basis for comparison when learning (Cummins, 1986). BICS and CALPS are two distinct registers of language and it is vital for second language teachers to explicitly teach the differences between them, as well as the pragmatic uses of language in various social contexts. ESOL teachers need to be particularly cognizant of the structure of their lessons and be certain to incorporate the active teaching of pragmatic usages in a variety of registers.

For English Learners in particular, a strong foundation in vocabulary is necessary for the progression of language development. However, direct instruction in the meaning of words is not all teachers need to be providing for their learners. Engaged teachers also provide instruction in reading strategies, so that students will have the tools they need to deconstruct, analyze, and construct meaning from words independently. It would be an impossible task for a teacher to teach every single unknown word in a text as individual units of study. There are too many words in the English language. According to Lehr, Osborn, & Hiebert (2004) "no more than 8-10 words can be taught effectively each week" (3). For this reason, teachers should try to simultaneously teach both vocabulary and word-learning strategies, utilizing both oral and written language and drawing from both oral and printed registers. As "language acquisition is a social activity," activities based on authentic and purposeful communication should be utilized (Tinker Sachs & Ho, 2007: 127). Teachers should work to access students' schema during instruction, incorporating the use of students' mother tongues, cognates, and dictionaries to optimize learning and growth (Lehr, Osborn & Hiebert, 2004). Most of all, tasks for vocabulary development should not be isolated "practice" activities without integrated or applicable purpose. In the best possible scenario, vocabulary items should be drawn from the content literature so that vocabulary scaffolding and communicative practice reinforce one another.

When teachers work to incorporate all three of these elements in the design of their units, and work to motivate English Learners, more effective learning will be the result. During design, working from the end is the best way to ensure that the unit is headed in an optimal direction and that it can be developed in the most operative sequence with as many parallels to the primary content as are applicable to make instructional time engaging.

Without a doubt, it is critical that teachers show a personal interest in students outside of class time. Be approachable. Allow them the support of their first language where appropriate and encourage them to maintain their connection to their first language and heritage. Allow students who resist learning English the freedom to express why they feel how they feel. Sometimes just the willingness to listen to and discuss the unpopular opinion is enough to change a student's willingness to engage with that teacher in class. Setting a positive example with one's own language and personal presentation can also go a long way toward promoting the study of and interaction with the English language and with American culture.

Additionally, even if a student considered no aspects of English-speaking culture admirable in any way, if living in the United States, that student will likely still need some kind of relationship with English. Teachers need to help students recognize that it is ok to wear many "hats." They can maintain their pride and identification with their home culture and first language while also developing a positive identity as a second language learner. The two are not mutually exclusive.

Above all else what ESOL teachers can give English Learners to increase their motivation and ultimately their effective learning is positive, successful experiences with communication in English. The way to provide those experiences is by integrating dynamic communicative tasks with a critical pedagogy and providing students with the right amount of language support in order to succeed. Engage their intellect and students will work to find the words.

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