Implementing Interventions to Increase Motivation in the English Language Classroom: from Theory to Practice

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Abstract—A growing body of empirical research shows a relationship between student motivation and learning outcomes in the teaching of English in ESL and EFL contexts. Despite a sound theoretical framework, however, there are few studies which implement strategies intended to increase motivation and report findings. Using qualitative research, this article attempts to link theory with practice and shed light into the factors which demotivate students and act as barriers to effective foreign language learning. Theoretical principles are applied in the classroom and the effectiveness of interventions to increase motivation is assessed. Thus, the article is pragmatic in focus and provides teachers with a tool for analyzing students' motivation so that they implement effective motivation strategies in the English classroom. The strategies and interventions suggested can be adapted and used by teachers in various teaching situations after taking into consideration their own teaching context.

Index Terms—English as a foreign language, motivation, interventions to increase motivation

I. INTRODUCTION

It is widely accepted in the relevant literature that motivation is positively linked to foreign language acquisition (Gardner, 1985). Motivation is the second more important determinant of educational success, with the first being aptitude, a learner's cognitive capacity (Skehan, 1989: 38). Contemporary views recognize that motivation is a complex phenomenon, and that many personal, social, and contextual parameters exist.

Many definitions of motivation have been suggested in the relevant literature. According to some researchers, motivation refers to the initiation, direction, intensity, persistence, and quality of behaviour, especially goal-directed behaviour (Maehr and Meyer, 1997). Brophy (2004) defines student motivation as "the degree to which students invest attention and effort". Dörnyei (2001) suggests that motivation includes three elements: why people, how hard and how long people are eager to engage in an activity.

Nevertheless, despite the fact that there is a rich literature on motivation and many resources available to educators that provide strategies to foster motivation, there is a shortage of studies which, apart from suggesting practical strategies to increase student motivation, implement theoretical principles in the classroom and assess the effectiveness of these classroom interventions. The aim of this article is to fill this research gap between theory and practice, and in doing so to provide teachers with an array of "real world" suggestions which they can use after taking into account their unique teaching situation and students' needs.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The following motivation theories reflect research in both educational psychology and foreign language.

According to the social cognitive expectancy-value model of achievement motivation, learners' "achievement outcomes", including effort, task or course persistence and performance (Wigfield and Eccles, 2000:107), are dependent on a) the degree to which learners are confident that they will experience success with reasonable effort, and b) the degree to which they value and appreciate success and subsequent benefits.

Central to the social cognitive theory is the concept of self-efficacy. Learners' perceived self-efficacy of their capabilities to accomplish "designated types of performances" affects effort, confidence, and persistence Bandura (1986:391).

Attribution theory of motivation posits that the perceived causes of educational outcomes, called attributions, impact heavily on achievement behaviour and on expectations for success. Attributions are categorized along three elements: stability, locus, and control (Weiner, 1986). Stability refers to how stable the attribution is over time. In relation to locus and control, when learners ascribe unsuccessful performance to factors outside their control, or external to them (e.g. ability, or an easy task), rather than to controllable, or internal causes (e.g. effort, or preparation), they develop low

expectancies for success, showing little effort and persistence. Self-determination theory posits that people have a need for autonomy, competence and relatedness. Students with intrinsic motivation participate in learning activities in which "the sole rewards are the spontaneous feelings of interest and enjoyment" (Deci and Moller, 2005:582). Intrinsically motivated learners are more likely to attain higher levels of achievement than extrinsically motivated students, who are motivated from rewards associated with success (Gardner, 1988: 106).

Goal orientation theory incorporates both cultural parameters of behaviour and cognitive processes (Thrash and Elliot, 2001). It contends that students who adopt mastery goal orientations engage in educational activities with a focus on acquiring knowledge or skills, believe in the relationship between effort and outcome, and are oriented toward "improving their level of competence" (Ames, 1992). Mastery goals are associated with an intrinsic interest in learning, and positive attitudes towards learning. In contrast, students who adopt performance goals are principally concerned with self-worth (Covington, 1984), and recognition as good students. They often avoid challenging tasks, give up easily and lack confidence in their ability.

According to Covington's (1992) self-worth theory, the need for self-worth is a basic human need, so students often behave in ways to protect their self-worth. For example, they may procrastinate studying for an exam, so that they can attribute failure to lack of effort, rather than lack of ability, since this could damage their self-image. Students may also adopt reputation-saving strategies, such as setting unrealistically high learning goals, or simply choosing not to participate.

Gardner's (1985) social psychological approach highlights the role of attitudes towards L2 as a determinant of motivation to learn. It stresses the link between language and culture, and conceptualizes the "integrative motive" in terms of: a) integrativeness (disposition toward L2 community), b) attitude toward the learning situation, and c) motivation (desire to learn the L2, effort and attitudes towards learning the L2).

III. THE RESEARCH STUDY

The aim of the research study was to identify the sources of motivational problems of students who study English as a foreign language in Greek state upper secondary schools. A further aim was to use this data in order to implement interventions to foster motivation and to evaluate their effectiveness. To identify sources of motivational problems, the research questions were: a) what are these students' classroom and social profiles?, and b) what are the reasons for their lack of motivation?

The overall aim was to develop a methodological tool which teachers of English can use in order to identify motivational problems and implement effective strategies to overcome them, regardless of their specific teaching situation.

IV. METHODOLOGY

A. Methods of Data Collection

The following methods of qualitative data collection were utilized. First, semi-structured interviews, because they can help assess individual preferences, values and attitudes, due to their strength for in-depth, detailed data collection compared to other methods, and because they allow "individual perspectives and experiences to emerge" (Patton, 2002). Second, direct observation, as it provides researchers with a wealth of information, allows the observer to understand the context in which people interact, and offers a holistic perspective of the context under investigation (Patton, 2002).

B. Participants

Participants were pupils in an English classroom of intermediate level in the second grade in an upper secondary school. There were nine pupils, seven boys and two girls, aged 15-16 years. Lessons were held three times a week for forty-five minutes each time. Most students had poor performance, and were not motivated to learn. Semi-structured interviews and direct observation revealed the following:

These students, despite having difficulty coping with the demands of the lesson, the three students did not have disruptive behaviour. However, they were silent and withdrawn most of the time, without being willing to participate.

Research also revealed that these students attributed their low performance to what they perceived as lack of ability in the English language, rather than effort or other factors. As a male student stated, "I'm good at most subjects, but English is too difficult for me". According to attribution theory (Weiner, 1985) when students attribute success to factors outside their control (e.g. academic ability) their motivation levels are usually low. In addition, they suffered from language anxiety, which has been shown to have a negative effect on motivation and foreign language acquisition (Gardner & MacIntyre, 1993).

Also and connectedly, most students' English language performance was well below average. They had, however, average performance in most school subjects, so their low performance in English was not due to a deficit of academic ability. They were not apathetic students, uninterested in learning English or alienated from school learning.

V. CLASSROOM INTERVENTIONS

The following motivational strategies were implemented.

A. Establishing a Learning Community and a Supportive Classroom Atmosphere

It is a central point in all motivation theories that creating a learning community that provides the environment for "optimal motivation" (Alderman, 2004) is important. For example, I tried to foster the belief that he was there to provide all students with help in their learning efforts, and not to ignore, reprimand, or mock them. This was achieved through negotiating with the students a set of classroom rules. Making fun of a wrong answer was not accepted, and a norm of "mistake tolerance" was ratified. Errors were considered a natural part of learning a foreign language (Dörnyei, 2001: 42). In addition, I clearly communicated to the whole classroom that I had expectancies of success for all students, regardless of previous performance. My teaching practices reflected this. For example, groups were formed from mixed ability students, were given equally academically challenging tasks, and the same questioning strategies were used for all students (Alderman, 2004), so that students realized that there was no differential treatment.

B. Providing Indirect, rather than Direct Correction

In order to make writing feedback less threatening to students' self-esteem and reduce anxiety, in writing tasks I prompted students about the location and the nature of errors by means of a correction code (Lee 1997:466). Students were prompted about the nature of their mistake by means of symbols (Byrne 1988). Similarly, in speaking tasks I avoided over detailed, constant on the spot correction, since it can undermine their confidence, and it discourages learners who are too conscious about "sounding silly" to experiment with new language (Lightbown and Spada, 1999:31). Moreover, I provided scaffolding (cognitive modeling, prompts and questions) so that the students had an opportunity to develop repair strategies and find the answer. Behaviour that could be considered a threat to their social image (e.g. criticism about their performance) was avoided, while these three students were provided with opportunities to show their special strengths to their peers. For example, their organizational skills were exploited in project work, in which they often assumed the role of organizer.

C. Making Use of Students' Experiences and Lives

In order to promote learning goals rather than work-avoidant goals or passive participation, I devised tasks, or altered coursebook activities so that students were provided with authentic opportunities to use the target language and engage in purposeful communication, using their experiences and opinions.

D. Providing Opportunities for Group Work

I incorporated short-term projects in the classroom, because with projects students are more personally involved in the learning process, are less concerned with self-worth protection, and are motivated by a tangible end product. Project work encourages autonomy, imagination and creativity (Hedge, 2000), and students realize that they can be successful if they apply effort, cooperation, or persistence.

E. Using Individual Criterion-referenced Grading Standards

The students' progression was measured rather than their performance in relation to their classmates, while portfolios were used for the evaluation of students' progress. Face threatening activities, such as comparison of ability was avoided, because such practices can negatively influence low achievers in a number of ways, such as "avoidance of risk taking, use of less effective or superficial learning strategies, and negative affect directed toward the self" (Ames, 1992: 264). In order to promote effort, rather than ability attributions, I provided effort feedback, showing to them that they can perform better if they try harder (Dörnyei, 2001: 121).

F. Establishing Specific Learning Aims

I communicated to these students that I had specific learning aims for them, and they were given relatively accurate, but sufficiently high expectations for language performance. To this end, a "learning contract" was negotiated. The first step entailed students realizing their underperformance and agreeing to be committed to achieve specially defined learning goals. The second stage included carefully defining clear long and short term learning goals. The third stage included the teacher's commitment that he was there to help, facilitate and support them.

G. Personalizing the Curriculum and Supplementing the Teaching Material

Apart from the coursebook students were provided with tasks with assignments and activities that were at a challenging level of difficulty, but could be successfully completed with reasonable effort (Csikszentmihalyi, 1993). Students' parents were informed that supplementary material was designed to help, and not to punish their children for their low performance. According to Brophy (2004) engaging parents in their children's progress is a characteristic of successful teachers. In this way I also tried to make use of students' experiences and lives. In order to promote learning goals rather than work-avoidant goals or passive participation, I devised tasks, or altered coursebook activities so that students were provided with authentic opportunities to use the target language and engage in purposeful communication, using their experiences and opinions.

H. Increasing Expectancies of Success

This involved "consciously arranging the conditions" (Dörnyei, 2001: 57) for success. Pre-task activities provided students with enough assistance, and potential obstacles to completing tasks were removed by addressing them in

advance (e.g. modeling effective strategies). To reduce test anxiety, students were given sufficient advance warning and were informed about test specifications and assessment criteria.

Of course, the above interventions overlap. For example, both communicative activities and participation in projects increase autonomy and involvement, while most of the above interventions reduce language anxiety.

VI. RESULTS

The effectiveness of the interventions was assessed on the basis of a) English language performance, b) their attributions for achievement in the English language and their expectancies of success, and

Their target language performance improved, as evidenced from the end of term examination results. Improvement was most noticeable in writing and reading skills. Nevertheless, they succeeded in achieving most of the learning goals determined at the beginning of the school term.

As regards their attributions for achievement, the students' narratives show at the end of the school term they did not attribute success to factors outside of their control. Instead, they seemed more confident in their ability, developed increased expectations of future success in the L2, and believed in a correlation between effort and success.

Preoccupation with self-worth protection decreased (but not disappeared) at the end of the school term, and they seemed to focus more on learning goals. They felt less language anxiety, and were more eager to cooperate with their classmates. Most students seemed to have developed intrinsic motivation, participating in learning activities for the sole reward of "the spontaneous feelings of interest and enjoyment that occur when one engages in the activities" (Deci and Moller, 2005: 582).

VII. DISCUSSION

Implementing interventions to foster student motivation is not a straightforward process. First, educators are bombarded by a plethora of resources that provide suggestions to enhance learning motivation. The difficulty lies in determining the appropriate classroom interventions for a particular teaching context, education system and curriculum and in transforming theory into everyday classroom practice.

Second, the results of interventions take time, so teachers need to show persistence and consistency. English teachers should also be flexible enough so that they constantly evaluate the effectiveness of interventions, come up with solutions, and incorporate changes in their motivation strategies. For example, at the beginning of the school term the three students were unwilling to participate in projects, because they believed that cooperation would reveal their weaknesses to their fellow students. I attempted to overcome this difficulty with persistence, providing modeling, which was instrumental in making them realize that cooperation did not constitute a threat to their popular image.

Finally, it is important to acknowledge a limitation of this study. Due to the small number of participants, care should be taken in generalizing the research findings.

VIII. CONCLUSION

The pedagogical implications are clear. First, although all motivational theories incorporate useful elements, motivation is such a complex phenomenon, that no single theory is adequate. Educators need to make a synthesis, incorporating elements from many theoretical approaches in their everyday classroom practice. The second implication is that theory and action go hand in hand, so before employing strategies to foster motivation, teachers should get to know their students, their families, their social and cultural background, the value they attach to knowledge of the English language, in order to shed light into the reasons that underlie their willingness to engage in learning activities. English teachers should be aware that what motivates students in one setting may prove ineffective in a different one (Schunk et al, 2008:40). Since there is not a "bag of tricks" that can enhance student motivation to learn, a "teacher as a researcher" approach is an indispensable research tool. Such an approach, which brings together theory and practice, can have positive effects both on the professional development of English teachers and on students' motivation and language acquisition.

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