

Motivation

Motivation is one of the most important factors in successful learning, and teachers and trainers often talk about how they need to 'motivate' their learners. But what do they actually mean? Some try to motivate by making demands, while others have a softer approach; some shout, others remain calm; some talk to the group, others to individuals. Which works better?

This workshop will look at motivation in the context of language learning. We will discuss definitions, and its importance, before considering which aspects of motivation a teacher can actually influence most easily.

Over to you: How do you define motivation? Take a minute or two to think about this and write your ideas down, then discuss with the person sat next to you. Do you agree? You will share your ideas with the rest of the group.

Definition of motivation

Of course, defining something like motivation is not easy, and no one answer is correct. This definition in the presentation is from an academic journal about English language learning and teaching, but you will find definitions in texts on a wide range of subjects. It highlights four features:

1. The reason we want to learn

There are so many reasons why people learn languages or any other subject for that matter. Why do you want to learn? Why are you here today? Maybe you want to learn about motivation because you personally find it an exciting and endlessly fascinating subject! Or maybe you want to learn about motivation because it's a part of a course you have to take part in? Maybe you're just hoping for some practical tips to take into the classroom?

3. The kind of person we are

Again, there are a myriad of factors that determine who we are. Perhaps you prefer working in a group, whereas others in your group prefer working on their own? How motivated will they be by group work? Perhaps you are a sociable, outgoing person who is motivated by tasks which give you a chance to interact with others. That's fine... as long as those you're going to interact with are similar characters. This is why, as a teacher or trainer, it's so important to know the people you're working with.

2. The strength of our desire to learn

If you are here just because it's part of your course, probably your desire to learn is less than that of your colleague who is fascinated by motivation as a subject. This aspect is crucial: motivation isn't black and white, and the desire to learn can be affected not only by the subject of your study, but also how you're feeling today, the other people you're with, etc, etc. Perhaps today you're feeling a bit tired? Maybe you had a late night and just want to 'get through' this workshop? If so, the strength of your desire to learn today is probably a bit less than normal, even if you really do enjoy learning about this kind of topic.

4. The task

"Now, please work on your own for 30 minutes and write down everything I've just said."

In most teaching/training scenarios, after you decide on your aims you usually think about the kind of tasks you will use. (Actually, I would argue that quite often teachers think about the kind of tasks they will do in a class, then adapt aims from them...) Will you do a simple written exercise - individual student working with their notes - or a more complex group task involving everyone talking to everyone else at some point? The tasks you do in class are often what learners remember, they are the substance of the learning.

Note: Of course, all of these features can overlap in the classroom.

Why is motivation important?

In recent times, there has been a lot of research into the importance of motivation in second language learning. It has been proved that, even with a great range of skills or aptitude, a learner is less likely to be successful if they are not motivated. It's very easy to draw comparisons with sports stars here: you probably all know of footballers who seemed remarkably skilled, but never quite fulfilled their potential. Often that is because they lost their motivation (as many of them freely admit).

Which aspects of motivation can a teacher influence?

Over to you: Considering its importance, what can a teacher/trainer do to make their classes more motivated? If we go back to the four features outlined in our earlier definition, which ones do you think a teacher can most easily influence?

Well, it's not a black and white situation, as we have already seen. You may be able to influence the reason for learning or the kind of person the learner is, particularly over a longer period. However, I'm going to focus on two:

The strength of the desire to learn

If you are feeling a bit tired, a bit removed from the workshop, what kind of teacher or trainer is more likely to motivate you? Perhaps one who is willing to be engaging and 'wake you up' rather than one who is quiet and undemanding? Almost certainly it will be one who can develop some sense of interest in what you are studying... Increasing this strength of desire can have a really big impact, and teachers and trainers should recognise that and aim to do it by making what they do interesting for their learners.

The task

The task (as much as the attitude of the teacher or trainer) is what can really influence the strength of desire. What kind of things did you hate doing at school? And what did you like doing? I'm sure you all have your favourites, and that the tasks you enjoyed doing you found more motivating. The teacher or trainer should see this and look for their tasks to be motivating. Again, there are so many factors – for example, as a starting point you may want to make sure the task is not too easy, but not too difficult either. And of course, what's motivating for one groups of learners (or even one learner) may be different for another group.

Over to you: You will now going to work through several tasks yourselves to look at motivation in more detail, followed by some exercises to help you explore a part of the Premier Skills English website called Goal!