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**THE EFFECTS ON ADULT ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING
PROCESS WHEN MOTIVATION IS A KEY FACTOR IN THE STUDENT –
TEACHER RELATIONSHIP**

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THE EFFECTS ON ADULT ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING PROCESS WHEN MOTIVATION IS A KEY FACTOR IN THE STUDENT – TEACHER RELATIONSHIP

Abstract

The purpose of this article is to explore how teachers can use motivation to positively influence the learning process of adult learners of English as a foreign language. This will be done through the use of theory and the illustration through an experience by the author on how he managed to understand and use a student's motivation to successfully and positively influence his learning process that finally culminated in a success story.

Resumen

El propósito de este artículo es explorar sobre como los maestros pueden usar la motivación para influenciar de manera positiva el proceso de aprendizaje de estudiantes de inglés como lengua extranjera. Esto se hace a través del uso de la teoría y del ejemplo de la experiencia del autor de cómo logró comprender y usar la motivación de un estudiante para influenciar exitosa y positivamente en su proceso de aprendizaje que culminó en una experiencia exitosa.

Key Words: Motivation, Extrinsic, Intrinsic, English as a Foreign Language, Adult Learners

THE EFFECTS ON ADULT ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING PROCESS WHEN MOTIVATION IS A KEY FACTOR IN THE STUDENT – TEACHER RELATIONSHIP

Student motivation is something that may not be totally appreciated by some educators as they may neglect its importance or do not explore how important it is in the classroom. They may feel that if they commend their students positively for their good work and make their classes somewhat fun they have that area covered. So, in what ways can teachers use student motivation to positively influence the learning process of adult learners of English as a foreign language? It is important for teachers to understand the complexities and varieties of motivation that exist and how they affect the learning process of adult learners. This article seeks to illustrate an example of how the author managed to understand student motivation and use it to positively influence a student's learning process by going through the different steps of the learning process and attempting different strategies to arouse and maintain the student's motivation. The general objective of this article is to find out and describe how student motivation has an impact on the teaching/learning process of Adult learner of English as a Second Language. The specific objectives are to explain and exemplify how motivation can affect the teaching/ learning process of adult learners of English as a Second Language and Show the importance for

THE EFFECTS ON ADULT ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING PROCESS WHEN MOTIVATION IS A KEY FACTOR IN THE STUDENT – TEACHER RELATIONSHIP

teachers to understand the importance of motivation when teaching adult learner of English as a second language.

Contextualization

In May 2010, I landed a contract to give English classes to a group of accountants in a Canadian petroleum company in Bogotá. The students were all beginners, more or less at the same level. The company needed that all their employees could speak English by mid-2011 so it gave them the opportunity and time to learn. The group had six students, all in their late 20s or 30s and all of them were accountants. They were very nervous at the beginning and clearly under pressure as I later learned that their inability to learn English by the end of 2011 could hamper their professional advancement. This clearly is an example of an extrinsic motivation and it was up to the educator, in this case the author, to foment a positive interaction between both extrinsic and intrinsic motivation as will be discussed in the Theoretical Framework.

THE EFFECTS ON ADULT ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING PROCESS WHEN MOTIVATION IS A KEY FACTOR IN THE STUDENT – TEACHER RELATIONSHIP

After a few weeks, most of the students loosened up and small but noticeable progress was made, especially in their listening and reading skills, but most of them were still in their silent phase, refusing to speak more than a few words. There were two students, that did not seem to show much progress, Fernando¹ and Camila², and I noticed that they were constantly feeling stressed in the classroom. To try to help them relieve their stress, I had a talk with them in an effort to gauge their motivation level and understand their position, and both said they were worried because they never were good in English and didn't think they had the capacity to learn. They mentioned expressions such as "I was never good at English, not even in school" or "I don't think I am capable of speaking English". They also expressed that they felt bad since their colleagues were advancing much faster and easier than they were. I tried my best to reassure them that they were perfectly capable of learning and all learners have their own pace and they should not compare themselves with others. They were also assured that they could seek help and support before or after class. Fernando seemed somewhat reassured but Camila didn't seem too convinced.

¹ Name changed for privacy reasons.

² Name changed for privacy reasons.

THE EFFECTS ON ADULT ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING PROCESS WHEN MOTIVATION IS A KEY FACTOR IN THE STUDENT – TEACHER RELATIONSHIP

Weeks went by and Fernando's attitude had noticeably changed. He was always early to class, his attendance was almost perfect and he tried to participate more in class. He had even tried to express himself in English, albeit in a very basic way. He seemed a lot less stressed. He, therefore, proved to be a hard worker; something that was also true in his professional life, as he received many commendations naming him the best worker of the month in his department repeatedly. He would sometimes come early or wait until the others had left to ask for tips and questions he may have felt embarrassed to ask in class I would do my best to answer them. He was clearly motivated and this motivation was being sustained and fueled both by what went on in the classroom, and his interactions with me and his fellow classmates, as well as from his own personal desire to learn English.

On the other hand Camila's performance was not as consistent as her colleague's. She had changed for a few classes like Fernando but slowly she sank back into being stressed and uncomfortable. Despite attempts to reassure her, after a few weeks she dropped out of the course. I tried to persuade her to continue but she said she had given up on learning English. This is a clear example of what Gardner (2001, p.10) and Root (1999, p. 26) have said on how individuals can react very differently to certain models of learning as well as attempts by the teacher to reach to them and motivate them. Fernando appeared

THE EFFECTS ON ADULT ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING PROCESS WHEN MOTIVATION IS A KEY FACTOR IN THE STUDENT – TEACHER RELATIONSHIP

to gain a favorable disposition towards me, and lost his fear to attempt to communicate with me in English. There was a positive rapport between us, and that made the teaching-learning dynamic to be positive and thus his attitude was positive and his motivation to learn English very high. On the other hand, Camila's reaction was much less positive and she was not able to sustain her motivation on her own or through the interactions within the classroom.

After around the fifth month and with noticeable amount of progress among all the remaining students I suddenly lost all of them except Fernando. The company they worked for decided to make a major shift in personnel and laid off many of them to replace them with others. When Fernando was the only one to show up for class he was dazed when he explained what had happened, but later showed determination to go on. He felt the company had showed confidence in him, and believed he was not only a valuable asset, but had potential to progress within it. And he knew that one of the key aspects to achieve this was to learn English. This external influence clearly had a positive impact in his already strong internally fueled motivation showing a positive interaction between both types of motivations as discussed by Deci, Vallerand, Pelletier, and Ryan (1991) . His resolve was strengthened and he was determined to push on.

THE EFFECTS ON ADULT ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING PROCESS WHEN MOTIVATION IS A KEY FACTOR IN THE STUDENT – TEACHER RELATIONSHIP

After about two weeks of having class just with Fernando, three other new students from another group joined the class. The tables had turned, and no longer was Fernando lagging behind the rest, now he was the frontrunner in the class. It may have been expected that he might have grown impatient since his new classmates were considerably behind but instead he was at ease and was always willing to assist the others in things they did not understand. He later said he also reinforced some of his previous knowledge, certain things were clarified and it allowed him to practice speaking whilst he assisted the others.

The classes we had were as dynamic as possible. As a teacher, the classes were made to be as attractive as possible to the students to keep them engaged. Learning was done in different ways and tried to employ the new knowledge in real life contexts such as going out to different parts of the city (near the office) and talking about different things. I encouraged the students to read English media and bring articles about current events that they were interested personally or professionally and they were discussed in class. They also showed interest in learning about the culture in English speaking countries. They brought what they knew (some had visited the US and UK before) and their doubts and discussed them as a group. Every two months they were to make a presentation with topics that had to do with the Oil Industry. They really liked this sort of exercise because they

THE EFFECTS ON ADULT ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING PROCESS WHEN MOTIVATION IS A KEY FACTOR IN THE STUDENT – TEACHER RELATIONSHIP

researched and learn things from the industry they were working in (which was relatively new to them since they studied to be accountants and were still not entirely familiar with the Oil business) and in the process practiced their English. Despite having a very heavy workload, they strove to complete their tasks on time and tried their very best. And as Fernando once expressed to me, these exercises actually piqued his interest to learn and understand more about the Oil Industry. Other exercises that were done in which they responded favorably to were related to everyday tasks in the work place. These included the writing of emails, memos and formal letters; the simulation of meetings (including videoconferencing and phone calls) and formal debates and open discussions. These were things they knew how to do in their native tongue but could not do in English. They knew that to learn to do so would be useful in their professional career and managing to do so also provided in some a sense of accomplishment.

By mid-2011 the company interviewed each of the students and determined they had sufficient knowledge of the English Language to perform their tasks and remain in employment. I was surprised when Fernando gave me the news, not because of the news but of the way he explained it. He was dismayed because he felt he had not learnt enough and wished to be 100% fluent. This shows that even though he may have started the

THE EFFECTS ON ADULT ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING PROCESS WHEN MOTIVATION IS A KEY FACTOR IN THE STUDENT – TEACHER RELATIONSHIP

English course just to keep his job, it was no longer the case. I personally agreed and thought they could still improve their English skills but the company superiors thought that was enough it was deemed the classes had come to an end.

Around two months an email was received from Fernando (Appendix A) that stated that he needed to continue to learn English. He explained that he had managed to convince his superiors to continue with the English lessons on his own for another 5 months and at the end of the year he would travel to Calgary, Canada; to take an intensive course and work in the main headquarters of the company temporarily while he studied. He was very happy and his enthusiasm was impressive. The change from the beginning had been remarkable, and seeing how he struggled and was stressed, in the beginning it would have been impossible to imagine his progress.

His progress was remarkable. By the end of the five months, Fernando could sustain a conversation almost flawlessly. He did not have to rely on some Spanish words or expressions to have himself understood and could watch a TV series or movie without subtitles and understand almost everything. He still had some problems when writing but he insisted he would have that sorted out once in Canada. I was very proud of him and he

THE EFFECTS ON ADULT ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING PROCESS WHEN MOTIVATION IS A KEY FACTOR IN THE STUDENT – TEACHER RELATIONSHIP

was probably the first student I ever had that I saw who managed to become a good English speaker despite having such a rough and troublesome beginning.

Theoretical Framework

Motivation can be extrinsic, meaning it comes from an outside source. This could be pursuing some sort of reward or external benefit. It is believed when the motivation is solely extrinsic, it is less probable that students will sustain this motivation for the timeframe required to properly learn a new language. Motivation can be intrinsic meaning that the student is pushed to learn from something that comes within him/her, that perhaps provides them with satisfaction. When students have intrinsic motivation it is normally because they have more a better disposition towards their teachers, the learning environment and what is learned. (Caciora, 2008, p. 560). It seems as if it would be ideal for students to be pushed solely by intrinsic motivation and for extrinsic motivation to be all but forgotten. However, one cannot demerit extrinsic motivation completely and just try to focus on what seems to be the "better" of the two types of motivation. As Deci, Vallerand, Pelletier, and Ryan (1991) have pointed: "Extrinsic motivation is no longer regarded as an antagonistic counterpart of intrinsic motivation. Instead, they can be combined together to form a continuum according to the degree from the most external one

THE EFFECTS ON ADULT ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING PROCESS WHEN MOTIVATION IS A KEY FACTOR IN THE STUDENT – TEACHER RELATIONSHIP

to the most internal one.”(as cited in Liu, 2015, p.52). The most important thing is that the students are highly motivated regardless of how extrinsic and/or intrinsic the motivation actually is. So, what is a motivated student? Gardner(1985) defines one as: one who is: “(a) eager to learn the language, (b) willing to expend effort on the learning activity, and (c) willing to sustain the learning activity”(p.10). Thus, motivation is something that can be initially aroused but must be sustained enough for him/her to be able to fulfill the learning process. This means an educator must understand his student’s or students’ needs and what they desire in order to assist in “starting the flame” of their motivation. This should not only depend on extrinsic motivators such as potentially furthering their professional, economic and/or social positions among others, but it in no way should exclude these motivators either. However, it is also important to assist the students in gaining intrinsic motivators such as a genuine interest for the target language’s culture, improving intellectually and/or learning the ability to communicate with people from different cultures in a language that was once wholly unknown to him or her. A combination of both types of motivation is ideal to get the student started in the path of learning a new language in a strong and sure-footed way.

THE EFFECTS ON ADULT ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING PROCESS WHEN MOTIVATION IS A KEY FACTOR IN THE STUDENT – TEACHER RELATIONSHIP

In almost every case, students have more than one type of motivation. In some cases they have none. It is the job of the educator to create new or stimulate existing motivations for students and help maintain it, and increase it throughout the learning process. It is the educator's responsibility, and we can assume all educators strive to engage the student with the material being learnt in order to help him/her to understand it. (Gardner, 2001, p.19). We also need to understand how these motivations might interact with each other and discover how we can use them to help students increase their performance. (Gardner, 2001, p.9). Again, the educator must dedicate his or her attention to engage and assess his or her student or students, identify their motivations, if there are any, and from there start developing strategies to either stimulate and promote any existing motivations and/or assist the student to create his/her own motivations. Every student and student groups are different and every time an educator begins work with new students he or she must understand each one and develop a strategy to get to each one and stimulate their motivation.

Our responsibilities as educators to maintain our students' motivation at levels is important in all the stages of the learning process. The arousal of interest and stimulation of motivation is only the beginning, however it is important to maintain this high level of

THE EFFECTS ON ADULT ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING PROCESS WHEN MOTIVATION IS A KEY FACTOR IN THE STUDENT – TEACHER RELATIONSHIP

arousal in order to complete an activity. (Caciora, 2008, p. 557). In this case it is the full learning process. Educators must at all times do what is in their power to maintain this high level of motivation and interest to ensure the learning process comes to a conclusion.

Throughout the learning process, as in any, there will always be highs and lows in the level of a student's motivation. This means the educator must be attentive at all levels of the process and identify the moments when motivation is low. When motivation is low, one must engage the student and assist him or her in finding that motivation once again and "fanning the flame" to get the motivation up to a high level again. It is important to not allow motivation to get critically low as this could seriously compromise the learning process, as we shall see in this article.

Motivation is a multifaceted and complex and we must have a diverse and flexible approach to it. What makes it even more complicated, and as Elizabeth Root (1999) established in her research, students react differently to different teachers (p.26) and certain students types (Sensing, Judging, and Feeling) prefer different learning strategies (Root, 1999, p.34). Gardner (2001) seems to agree with her when he says: "... some individuals will express more positive attitudes than others." (p.10). The student- Teacher dynamic is very important on how motivated a student or group will be throughout the process. The

THE EFFECTS ON ADULT ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING PROCESS WHEN MOTIVATION IS A KEY FACTOR IN THE STUDENT – TEACHER RELATIONSHIP

educator must try his or her utmost to reach out to his/her student and engage them not only on an academic/intellectual level but at a personal level as well. Student-Teacher friction could severely compromise the learning process and hinder the students' motivation. The educator should be open and figure out how to create positive rapport between him or herself and the students. And once again understanding the students and as Root (1999) pointed out identifying which learning strategies the students prefer (p.34). This should also help the student-teacher relationship as the students will feel more at ease if things are done in a way that they will. When students feel comfortable, it is much more likely for their motivation to be higher.

Conclusions

This experience remains one of the most enriching for me as a teacher. Prior to this experience, one of my first as a language teacher, I had theoretical knowledge on what motivation was, and the role it played in the language teaching/learning process. This experience, however, gave me true insight on what it was and what I can do as a teacher to promote motivation amongst my students. It is not only a story of success, which is Fernando's case, but of failure unfortunately was evidenced in Camila. The same approach

THE EFFECTS ON ADULT ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING PROCESS WHEN MOTIVATION IS A KEY FACTOR IN THE STUDENT – TEACHER RELATIONSHIP

was used with both students and it only effectively worked with one, and in order to truly engage students and promote high motivation among them and thus have a positive impact on the learning/teaching process, many approaches must be attempted. Students arrive to language classrooms for very different reasons and with different types of motivation: external and/or internal. It is the educator's task to understand them and either strengthen the already existing motivation or promote a new, preferably internal motivation. There is no other way to learn this than in the field in a real context, and it is a process of trial and error. It is important for the teacher to understand his/her students and thus be able to understand which attempts could be more effective in improving his/her students learning process. As Gardner said, it is assumed that teachers strive to engage their students with engaging material and heighten motivation. (2001, pg.19.) Complete success is not always attainable, but the success that we do achieve not only serves to motivate our students, but to motivate ourselves as educators and pushes us to strive to improve in our profession.

As we could see, this experience, if enlightening and informative, was not wholly successful. Although Camila had a promising start she began to slip in her learning process. It wasn't possible for her or myself to sustain and maintain her motivational levels and it reached a critically low point in which her learning process was severely

THE EFFECTS ON ADULT ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING PROCESS WHEN MOTIVATION IS A KEY FACTOR IN THE STUDENT – TEACHER RELATIONSHIP

compromised. Her response to my approaches were not as positive or lasting as Fernando's. Sometimes, as in this case, an educator can have more than one student and these students can be vastly different to each other. This provides a complicated scenario as there is usually one teacher and more than one student. Research should be undertaken to assist educators who are presented with these sort of scenarios and how they can develop strategies to stimulate and sustain motivation in a vastly diverse and numerous classroom, especially since day by day classrooms are becoming ever so heterogeneous and educators must be keen to developing their skills to keep up with these changes.

THE EFFECTS ON ADULT ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING PROCESS WHEN MOTIVATION IS A KEY FACTOR IN THE STUDENT – TEACHER RELATIONSHIP

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