
Generating Student Motivation

Michael Rost

Series Editor of *WorldView*

www.longman.com/worldview

Motivation has been called the “neglected heart” of language teaching. As teachers, we often forget that all of our learning activities are filtered through our students’ motivation. In this sense, students control the flow of the classroom. Without student motivation, there is no pulse, there is no life in the class. When we learn to incorporate direct approaches to generating student motivation in our teaching, we will become happier and more successful teachers.

Why is motivation so important in EFL?

The issue of motivation, particularly in EFL settings, is so important that other considerations about teaching methodology seem to pale in comparison. It is important to think about motivation as the essence of language teaching because of the stark realities

of learning English for most of our students. All of the conditions that we know contribute to successful second language acquisition are lacking in most EFL contexts: there just isn’t enough English input in the environment, there probably aren’t enough opportunities for interaction with English speakers, there usually aren’t enough strong role models promoting the learning of English, and there may not be widespread enough social acceptance for the idea of becoming proficient in English. Because of these adverse conditions, a learner has to have *extraordinary* motivation in order to succeed at learning English!

What does the research on motivation tell us?

The research on motivation defines motivation as an orientation toward a goal. (This orientation may be positive, negative, or ambivalent.) Motivation provides a source of energy that is responsible for *why* learners decide to make an effort, *how long* they are willing to sustain an activity, *how hard* they are going to pursue it, and *how connected* they feel to the activity.

Because igniting and sustaining a source of positive energy is so vital to ultimate success, *everything* the teacher does in the language classroom has two goals. One is, of course, to further language development, and the other is to generate motivation for continued learning. Much of the research on motivation has confirmed the fundamental principle of causality: motivation affects effort, effort affects results, positive results lead to an increase in ability. What this suggests, of course, is that by improving students' motivation we are actually amplifying their ability in the language and fueling their ability to learn.

What specific approaches can teachers take to generate motivation?

A number of initiatives in SLA research over the past decade have helped clarify our understanding of motivation and the specific psychological and behavioral components of motivation that we as teachers can influence. In preparing for teaching classes on TESOL methodology, I have read the work of researchers such as Gardner and Lambert, Deci and Ryan, Crookes and Schmidt, Williams and Burdon, Dornyei and Skehan, and Czikenmihahli in order to synthesize an approach to generating learner motivation in EFL settings. We can identify three levels or layers of motivation in language learning that are “operational,” or accessible to direct influence by the teacher. To the extent that a teacher can tap into any or all of these layers, he or she is more likely to become a “motivating” teacher.

The first layer of motivation: Finding your passion

The first layer or the central core of motivation is what might be called “finding your passion.” I would argue that all successful learning — not

only language learning — is somehow connected to a learner's passion. Passion, in this sense, means a person's central goals in life, the things the learner cares about most, the things that move him or her emotionally. I *don't* mean that a learner needs to become passionate about learning English in order to succeed. Rather, the learner needs to find a way to connect English learning to his or her real passion in life.

The teacher can help learners to bring their passion into the classroom in several ways. One is by introducing “hot elements” in the classroom — music, movies, fads, current topics, personalities, games, and so on — in order to trigger learners' real interests. The teacher can then use these triggers to build a class culture. If we introduce, or if we allow the learners themselves to bring in, samples of current songs, clippings of famous people, or photos or video clips, we invite greater engagement in the classroom.

Another way of helping learners find their passion is by organizing class activities around the theme of self-expression. There are a number of approaches here: personalized tasks, idea journals, speaking circles, interactive questionnaires. When learners realize that the content of the class is their personal lives, and that the teacher responds to them as people, not just as language learners, we invite a deeper level of commitment and motivation.

A third way of generating passion is through the psychological principle of “immediacy” — using yourself as a model of enthusiasm and motivation for learning!

The second layer of motivation: Changing your reality

In virtually every language learning setting, but particularly in EFL settings, learners cannot make and sustain sufficient progress in the L2 because they do not receive enough instruction,

not nearly enough attention in class, not nearly enough input or meaningful interaction or opportunities for serious output. Some studies in language immersion have estimated that a typical learner needs a minimum of four hours a week of quality contact with a language in order to make progress. Even if this estimate is not true for all learners, it is clear to most EFL teachers that learners need more language instruction than we can provide in our classrooms. Learners need more quality instruction — input, interaction, and opportunities for meaningful output — not only to make progress, but in order to maintain a sufficiently strong connection to the language and to build their own motivation for learning.

In my own language teaching and in my materials development, I now consider it a major part of *my job* to help students find opportunities for engaging learning tasks *outside* the classroom. Helping learners find quality “homework” is essential to maintain quality learning in the classroom. The ideas are endless: direct students to quality language learning websites (or build your own, as many teachers have done), make available quality audio, video, and multimedia learning sources, develop a small library of accessible readers and supplementary materials and self-access quizzes, worksheets and games. Spending classroom time to help students select, share, and evaluate their out-of-class work with English is just as important as covering a lesson in the textbook.

Helping students “change their reality” means moving them toward seeing language learning in a different way. It means helping them take simple, self-directed steps to make choices about learning. The first step is the most important, because it’s the one that can ignite this layer of motivation.

The third layer of motivation: Connecting to learning activities

Connecting refers to the engagement of

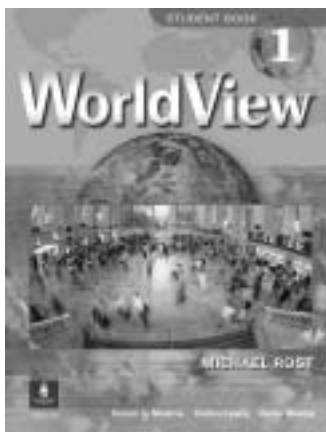
intention, attention, and memory in the activity itself. All teachers want their students to connect with the learning activities we prepare, yet we often fail to take concrete steps that will lead to better connection. Here are a few “connecting principles” that I try to employ in my own teaching materials, such as *WorldView*:

- Use personalized warm ups to lead into an activity. This creates relevance — an essential condition for memory to work effectively. Aim to get all students involved in the warm up.
- Make each learning activity as vivid and tangible as possible. Use provocative topics. Include visual aids (pictures, charts) and tangible references (games, boards, index cards) to engage students’ attention. Provide variety in your learning activities so that students can try out different learning styles (interpersonal, kinesthetic, musical, etc.).
- Make sure that each learner is involved, and everyone has an intention in every activity. Assign roles in pair and group activities. Monitor as closely as you can to be sure that each student, especially the shyer and weaker ones, remains active. It’s important to have everyone on board.
- Include inductive learning in your lesson. Be sure that students have an opportunity to discover things on their own — grammar points, pragmatic patterns, new vocabulary. Give students a chance to reflect. It’s always easier to teach deductively through direct presentations, but discovery learning is more meaningful and more permanent.
- Provide feedback on all levels of language progress. Progress in language involves more than just gradual mastery of grammar and vocabulary. Give feedback on elements of performance that affect students’ motivation: their success in an activity and their level of engagement.

Conclusion: Becoming a “motivating teacher”

A great deal of research has been done in the area of motivation, and why it is so fundamental to second language learning. The underlying issues related to motivation are complex, but it is clear that every person’s motivation to learn is flexible rather than fixed. As teachers, we can directly influence our students’ motivation about learning English.

The “three layers of motivation” is one way of conceptualizing how a teacher can influence each student. If we can make progress with our students in each of these layers, we can become more motivating teachers and bring “the heart of language teaching” into our classrooms.



For more information about *WorldView*,
visit the *WorldView* website at
www.longman.com/worldview



Michael Rost has been active in teaching and teacher training for over 20 years. He has taught in West Africa, Japan, Southeast Asia, England and the U.S. He specializes in oral language development and learner strategies, and has a particular interest in links between self-access learning and the classroom. He has written several articles and books on teacher training, including *Teaching and Researching Listening* (Longman, 2002). Michael Rost is Series Editor of *WorldView*, the new 4-level adult series from Longman. He is also principal author of the multimedia course *Longman English Interactive*.