Motivating Learners Through Pain and Pleasure

Kevin Knight

Kanda Gaigo Career College

Motivation theories for success are often used in both corporate training and language learning programs. In Japan, one of the keys to motivating learners to attain their success expectations is for them to overcome the restricting attitude that they are unsuccessful language learners because they have been studying English for years without having achieved fluency. This paper adapts a number of unique and effective techniques from the corporate training field to correct this attitude, resulting in increased learner confidence, motivation, and performance. Specifically, it discusses six activities used in a course orientation to realize an attitudinal paradigm shift, which empowers learners to achieve peak performances.

成功を収めるためにやる気を起こさせる理論は、企業研修と言語教育プログラム両方において使用されている。日本では、学習者に成功への期待感を持たせるためには長年の英語習得の失敗経験からくる消極的な態度を改めさせることが必要となる。この論文は、企業研修においてこのようにな消極的な態度を改めさせ、学習者の自信ややる気、そして能力を引き出すことに効果的であったユニークな手法から翻案したものである。特に、学習者が最高の成果を出せるようになるための思考と態度の変化いわゆるパラダイムシフトを起こす、講義の最初に行う6つのアクティビティーについて論説する。

In the corporate training field, significant ideas about achieving success abound: Robbins, a peak performance trainer, writes in his *Personal Power II* training program workbook that "[people] will do far more to avoid pain than [they] will to gain pleasure" and has his program participants change what they "link pain and pleasure to in order to change [their] behavior" (p. 8, Robbins, 1996); Peters, the business guru, attributes the following quote about achieving one-minute excellence to IBM founder Thomas Watson: "If you want to achieve excellence… you can get there today. As of this second, quit doing less-than-excellent work" (p. 1, Peters, 1994); regarding achieving success, the management consultant Heller writes that "[once] you have assessed yourself and have a realistic understanding of your abilities, you need to form a vision of significant but attainable aims. The great men and women of history all had a sense of vision and mission" (p. 8, Heller, 1999).

In second language acquisition research, there is also widespread recognition that motivation is of great importance for successful language acquisition, but there is less agreement about what motivation actually consists of. Motivation can be causative (i.e. have an effect on learning) and it can be resultative (i.e. be influenced by learning). It can be intrinsic (i.e. derive from the personal interests and needs of the learner) and it can be extrinsic (i.e. derive from external sources such as material rewards) (Ellis, 1994). The current spirit in motivational psychology is characterized by the *cognitive approach*, which places the focus on how the individual's conscious attitudes, thoughts, beliefs, and interpretation of events influence their behavior (i.e. how mental processes are transformed into action) (Dornyei, 2001). This approach is particularly important in Japan where students are notorious for being unmotivated to the point of apathy (McVeigh, 2001).

Good and Brophy, regarding how to maintain students' success expectations, state

> …the expectancy aspects of student motivation depend less on the degree of objective success students achieve than on how they view their performance: what they see as possible for them to achieve with reasonable effort, whether they define this level of achievement as successful or not, and whether they contribute their performance to controllable factors (e.g., effort, learning effective strategies) or to uncontrollable factors (e.g., fixed general ability, luck) (p. 378, Good and Brophy, 1995).

Therefore, no matter the students' ability, their motivation—even the most unmotivated—can be activated and excelled by their teachers. Empty reassurances will not be sufficient, but a combination of appropriately challenging interactive group tasks designed to make the student see that success can be achieved with reasonable effort can be effective.

In Japan improvement in TOEIC scores and English language proficiency is consistently growing in importance to employees. Consequently, creating and maintaining student "success expectations" has also become increasingly vital to the success of the language training programs for these employees. Therefore, it is wise for these language training programs to have a program orientation, which could apply the above motivational theories, either corporate or language acquisition based, in an effort to analyze students' success expectations and meet them.

To this end, a two-hour program orientation for a ten-week adult English language-training course (5 hours per weekday) was developed to achieve the following results:

1. Overcome the traditional unmotivated student attitude of "*My language progress is limited because I have already studied for many years, but I still can't speak English well.*"
2. Make students aware that they are personally responsible for limiting or for advancing their own language progress.
3. Enable students to visualize success in improving language proficiency and achieving better test results.

Six specific activities in the orientation included: 1) *From A to Infinity*, 2) *Pain vs. Pleasure*, 3) *Native Speakers Can't Do This*, 4) *English is Air*, 5) *Linking Pain to Not Studying*, and 6) *Personal Responsibility*. In order to change students' attitude to one where they believed that they could achieve fluency, activities 1, 3, and 4 were conducted. In order to increase student awareness of their own attitude toward learning English and their

personal responsibility for their progress, activities 2, 5, and 6 were conducted. Although the activities reflect the ideas of the aforementioned performance trainers and researchers, activities 2 and 5, in particular, were influenced by the ideas of Robbins.

From A to Infinity

In this first part of the orientation, students were asked to conceptualize "fluency" as being the ability to (1) hear English, (2) understand English, (3) think in English (without thinking in Japanese), and (4) speak English. In order to allow the students to "experience" such fluency, the alphabet was incorporated. The students first confirmed that "a, b, c…" was indeed English. Then the teacher modeled hearing and understanding "a" and thinking and speaking "b," at a speed that would not permit thinking in Japanese. While sitting in a circle, the students rapidly said the letters of the alphabet from a to z, one letter per student for a period of 3 or 4 minutes, all the while gaining in speed and proficiency. In order to have the students conduct the activity at a faster tempo, the instructor would indicate the current tempo by tapping the table at the speed the students were saying each letter and then the desired tempo by tapping the table faster. Subsequent to the letters of the alphabet, days of the week and months of the year were practiced.

Pain vs. Pleasure

During the *A to Infinity* activity, students expressed pain at the thought of substituting the days of the week for the letters of the alphabet. After writing *pain* and *pleasure* on the board and soliciting which of the two the students thought to be stronger, the students were told that the desire to avoid pain is stronger than the desire to seek pleasure. In most cases, the students had thought the opposite. Then the teacher elicited from the students that they associated sushi, ice cream, and beer with pleasure and that they associated English with pain, whereupon they were then encouraged to associate English with pleasure.

Native Speakers Can't Do This

At this point in the orientation, students had gained a significant increase in confidence in their ability to say the alphabet. In the next activity, they were instructed to repeat the "a, b, c…" activity in the reverse order of "z, y, x…" Before conducting the activity, the students were told that by practicing something again and again, they become better at it. Therefore, they should not be discouraged when they studied new vocabulary items, because their progress might naturally be slow at first. Second, after the activity had been introduced, they were told that they could not guess the next letter. Instead, they had to control their emotions, silently say the alphabet to themselves, and say the correct response. Finally, after successfully conducting the activity, they were told that "native speakers" could not do this activity. Therefore, by doing this activity, they could control English better than a "native speaker," which encouraged students to visualize future success.

English is Air

In changing their paradigm of spoken English, students were told that English was *air*, which started in our lungs and to which sound and speech were added in our throat and mouth. The students then practiced saying the Japanese tongue twister, *Akamakigami*, *Aomakigami, Kimakigami* (*red rolled paper, blue rolled paper, yellow rolled paper*) followed by instructions to say *I'll see you tomorrow*, at the same rate as they could say

Akamakigami. When the students had mastered this activity, they were told that during this activity, they spoke English as fast as or faster than a native speaker (and were reminded about the last activity during which they could control English better than a native speaker), so they could be fluent!

Linking Pain to Not Studying

In this activity, the students were asked to discuss and visualize (1) the changes taking place in the world and in Japan, (2) the amount of pain they would feel if they could not speak English, and (3) the amount of pleasure they would feel if they could speak English.

Personal Responsibility

TOEIC scores were a very important factor in determining the success of this training program so in this activity, the students were asked to identify which was most important for achieving a high test score in English: (1) the teacher(s), (2) the textbook(s), or (3) the student's effort. They were then told that (3) their personal effort was most important.

Results

The orientation was conducted in 12 twelve training programs (10 weeks in length) for 12 separate groups of employees (41 in total) of the same company over a period of three years. The average TOEIC score improvement was 194 points.

Conclusion

Was the orientation important in helping the employees to achieve this improvement? Certainly, there were many factors that affected success. The students' expectations of success and hard work throughout the course were important. Additionally, the teachers' beliefs in their students' potential for success (or lack of) had an influence on test scores. Moreover, in this program, peer pressure played a role, as students were told at the start of the course how well their peers had done in previous courses. Nevertheless, increasing the students' awareness of the learning process and their performance by allowing them to experience successful, rapid learning, both mentally and physically, in the program orientation did help to establish a positive atmosphere for the remainder of the course and contributed in some part to meeting their success expectations.

References

Dornyei, Z. (2001). *Motivational Strategies in the Language Classroom.* Cambridge: CUP.

Ellis, R. (1994). *The Study of Second Language Acquisition.* Oxford: OUP.

Good, T. L. and Brophy, J. (1995). *Contemporary Educational Psychology*. White Plains, NY: Longman

Heller, R. (1999). *Achieving Excellence.* New York: DK Publishing.

McVeigh, B. (2001) Higher Education, Apathy and Post-Meritocracy. *The Language Teacher.* 25 (10)

Peters, T. (1994). *The Pursuit of Wow!* New York: Vintage Books.

Robbins, A. (1996). *Personal Power II: The Driving Force*. San Diego: Robbins Research International, Inc.