Motivating large groups: Ways forward

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Reference data:

Pigott, J. D. (2011). Motivating large groups: Ways forward. In A. Stewart (Ed.), *JALT2010 Conference Proceedings*. Tokyo: JALT.

It is widely accepted that many students in Japanese compulsory education lack motivation to learn English. Some of the underlying causes may lie beyond the direct influence of the teacher, for example a lack of need for English in everyday life, and the deleterious *washback* effect of university entrance exams. However, in this paper I argue that an increased *awareness* of macro-contextual issues such as these, in addition to a practical repertoire of pedagogical techniques, can help teachers to meet the needs of their students better. The ten suggestions I present here are based on L2 motivation research into individuals, the self-concept, and group-dynamics. I recommend that findings from the formal research literature should be approached critically and adapted to local context. I finish by arguing that those attempting to improve compulsory English education in Japan should place more importance on the *process*, rather than the *products* of English learning.

広く受け入れられていることだが、日本の義務教育の生徒の多くには英語を学習する動機がない。その根底の理由の一部は、たとえば日常生活で英語が必要でないことや、大学入試の有害な「波及」効果など、教師の影響力では手に負えないであろう。しかし、本稿における筆者の主張は、こういったマクロ文脈的問題への「気付き」が出来ることが、指導法の技術の現実的なレパートリーに加えて、生徒のニーズに一層応えようとする教師の助けとなりうるというものである。筆者が本稿で出す十の提言の基となっているものは個人、自己概念およびグループ力学に対する第二言語での動機付けの調査である。筆者の推奨するところでは、定型調査の文献からの成果は批判的に取り扱うべきであり、局地的条件に適合させるべきである。また、筆者は本稿の最後で、日本の英語義務教育を改善しようとする者は英語学習の「成果」よりも「過程」をより重要視すべきであると主張している。

Motivation is a key driver of language learning success (Dörnyei, 2005). Researchers have investigated L2 motivation from various perspectives: as an aspect of the desire to integrate with a target community (Gardner, 1985); its relationship with the classroom context (Crookes & Schmidt, 1991); its effect on task-processing (Dörnyei, 2003a); the importance of group-dynamics (Dörnyei & Murphey, 2003); and in terms of the self-concept (Dörnyei, 2005). With the exception of recent work to conceptualise motivation in terms of its complex and fluid interaction with context (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011), a great deal of this research has attempted to discover so-called motivational "universals" through the statistical analysis of questionnaire data, rather than the motivation of particular students in particular contexts. It can therefore be argued that the findings of existing research have been of less than optimal practical use to teachers. For example,

there remains a need for context-specific advice for those of us teaching compulsory English classes in Japan, where many students lack motivation to learn English (Berwick & Ross, 1989; Benson, 1991; Irie, 2003). However, even treating a context such as Japan as a monolithic entity does not do justice to the diverse situations in which teachers find themselves. In the following paper I argue that a context-dependent *awareness* of, and *sensitivity* towards motivational factors can help teachers more than many abstract concepts "extracted" from aggregate statistical calculations. I draw on an eclectic range of research and my own teaching experience to offer a framework through which teachers can improve their understanding of, and cultivate, their students' motivation. It consists of four different perspectives on motivation: the *individual* the *group*, *society*, and the *self*. Each section is built around two or three suggestions for teachers. My advice is targeted particularly at teachers of compulsory English classes, or of classes in which the motivational picture is somewhat mixed. Teachers interested less in theory and more in practical ideas may find it preferable to view my suggestions in terms of activities and class management (the first seven suggestions), and teacher outlook/behaviour (the final three suggestions).

The individual

A focus on the individual entails thinking about how we can help students to cultivate (among other things) a personal desire to learn English, or *intrinsic motivation* (Deci & Ryan, 1985), clear goals and strategies to achieve those goals, and some degree of autonomy (Ushioda, 1997) so that learning is not restricted to the classroom. Space precludes a discussion of all of these issues, so the advice is limited to the selection and presentation of tasks. I have drawn on two sources in deriving these recommendations: (i) the types of activities that students claim to find motivating; and (ii) findings from empirical research concerning the characteristics of motivating tasks.

Suggestion 1. Focus on fluency work in pairs and groups

In an EFL environment it is important to maximise opportunities for spoken English interaction in class, and one of the best ways to do this is to use pair and group work. In my own informal and more formal (Pigott, 2009) measures of student opinion, students consistently claim to find pair and group work enjoyable. In their Four Strands approach, Nation and Newton (2009) recommend that 75% of class time should be spent on meaning-focused activity, much of which may presumably be spent in pairs or groups. However, their advice does not take into account the fact that many Japanese students spend an inordinate amount of time focusing on grammar and vocabulary in grammar-translation-style lessons. For this reason, teachers focusing on communicative skills may, depending on their teaching context, wish to reduce time spent on form-focused learning further. In practice, therefore, it might well be advisable to spend *as much time as possible* on fluency work in pairs and groups.

Ensuring that activities provide opportunities for fluency practice means that tasks need to be easy enough so that students can complete them without having to deal with too heavy a cognitive load. Teachers are therefore advised to choose textbooks that offer extensive pair and group work activities based on interesting content rather than grammar or lexis-heavy tomes.

Suggestion 2. Pay attention to the way you present tasks

As well as building up teacher-intuition over the years, it is likely that strategic thinking about the way we present ourselves and activities in class can help us to motivate our students. One way to do this is by whetting students' appetites for

activities and tasks. To do this, Dörnyei (2001) suggests projecting enthusiasm, communicating the expectancy that students will succeed, and adding a 'twist' to activities in order to get students motivated into tasks. Other skills that teachers may wish to develop are the use of narrative, or story-telling skills, and the ways in which they use their voice to attract and hold attention in class (see Maley, 2000, for a book-length exposition of this topic).

Perhaps one of the most important skills for the native English teacher in Japan is Japanese ability. The bigger the class, the lower the level, and the less motivated the students are, the more indispensable Japanese skills will be for explaining activities, managing the classroom, and building empathy. Needless to say, a native English teacher who studies her students' mother-tongue is a better role-model as a language learner than a teacher who does not.

Suggestion 3. Plan activities bearing in mind interest, relevance, satisfaction and expectancy

Keller (1983) identified four motivational conditions derived from empirical research that can be used to plan tasks and courses: *Interest; Relevance; Expectancy (of success)*; and *Satisfaction/outcome*. I will address each of these in turn.

There is perhaps no fool proof way to plan interesting activities and lessons. The approach I have had the most success with is to use topics and tasks that I personally find intriguing, and attempt to communicate my enthusiasm to the students. It is important to remember that students do not have to have prior interest in a topic to find it interesting. In my experience, and that of many of my colleagues, it is also true that young people are just as interested as they have always been in serious, contemporary issues. If presented well, I believe such topics will generally interest students the most.

Dörnyei (2001) observes that "one of the most demotivating factors for learners is when they have to learn something that they cannot see the point of because it has no seeming relevance whatsoever to their lives" (p. 63). Making English lessons relevant for students studying in an EFL environment is one of the more formidable challenges that teachers face. One way to add relevance is to utilise activities in which students envision a future as part of an English-speaking community. If it is difficult to do this, then what is perhaps most relevant to students is *what works in the classroom* to motivate them, rather than an abstract view of relevance conveyed by this or that corpus. Whatever approach the teacher (or administrator) decides to take regarding relevance, the teacher may wish to share the thinking behind his/her decisions, particularly at a time when success appears to be measured in terms of test scores, and in which students may have corresponding expectations.

One technique I would highly recommend to teachers who have yet to try it is role-play as an effective way of adding depth to the learning experience. For example, compare the task *Find out five things your partner did at the weekend* with the game *Alibi*, in which student detectives interrogate student suspects as to their activities over the weekend a crime was committed (Klippel, 1985). The latter approach is likely to prove more motivating than the former, perhaps in part because creates a here-and-now relevance to language-use.

In order to stimulate satisfaction with tasks and lessons, Dörnyei (2001) recommends recognising and celebrating student accomplishments and including tasks that involve the public display or performance of the outcome. Thus, activities such as presentations may not always be particularly popular among students during the planning stages (due to the stress associated with public performance), but on presentation day there can be tangible sense of satisfaction as students successfully meet the challenge. In terms of expectancy, a rough guide is that tasks

should be of a level that can facilitate fluency practice, in line with suggestion 1.

The group

We can use knowledge of group-dynamics to cultivate motivation. Three factors that have been shown to exert a significant influence on group behaviour are effective *leadership*, the adoption of *roles* and, and the cultivation of positive *group norms* (Dörnyei & Murphey, 2003).

Suggestion 1. Use routines and roles to cultivate cooperation, empathy and tolerance

Cooperative routines are an important way of turning positive behaviour into a habit. They also reduce the time that the teacher needs to spend giving instructions. One example of a cooperative routine would be to start each class with a review of homework in groups. Another would be to use of a set framework such as task-cycles (Willis & Willis, 2007) to cultivate a familiarity with the learning process.

A way to increase cooperation within routines is to introduce standard roles for group work. These can be assigned (e.g., discussion leader, coordinator, secretary, etc.) or chosen by the students. Routines and roles are there to help the teacher, and should not be constrain the learning experience. Therefore it might be refreshing to break with the normative routines in class, for example by going outside for class on a beautiful spring day!

Building empathy between students and teacher helps to create a comfortable learning environment. An important starting point for establishing empathy is to use student names and encourage students to use each others' names in English activities. A useful practical tool for building a personal connection with students is to use email to contact students about homework reminders, lesson feedback and personal issues on a confidential basis. This can be done by setting a homework assignment on the first day of class to send an introductory email to the teacher at an exclusive email address set up for the class.

A key aspect of empathy is tolerance. Teenagers can be insecure and cruel to each other at times. Add to this the frustrations and self-consciousness caused by having to speak in a foreign language, and there is a potential for interpersonal friction. Ways we can promote tolerance include experimenting with proximity (e.g., by arranging seating), and physical contact (e.g., activities that involve tactile contact between students). Tasks that involve the exchange of personal information, opinions, and feelings work to improve empathy between students.

Suggestion 2. Have students move around regularly, interacting with different people

In order to establish an environment in which tolerance is cultivated, and students do not form cliques, it is important to have students talking regularly to other students. In my experience, the easiest way to do this is by having a routine whereby students are split into two halves by numbers (e.g., two groups of ten), and paired with their numeric counterparts. It may also be appropriate to have periodic changes of regular seats.

The self

In a re-conceptualisation of L2 motivation theory in terms of motivation and the self-concept, Dörnyei (2005) developed the *L2 Motivational Self System*, in which motivated behaviour is seen as deriving in part from student effort to close the discrepancy between her ideal L2 self and her actual self. A self perspective opens interesting avenues to teachers hoping to instil

in their students a desire to learn a language, in that it draws to our attention the close relationship between motivation, culture, and the self construct. In line with the L2 motivational self system, Dörnyei and Ushioda (2011) propose a six-step motivational programme to generate and sustain a vision for language learning: (1) Construction of the ideal self: creating the vision; (2) Imagery enhancement: strengthening the vision; (3) Making the Ideal Self plausible; (4) Developing an action plan; (5) Activating the ideal self; and (6) Considering failure (p. 130). Given my focus in this paper on students who may not have well defined senses of selves, I will concentrate principally on step one of the above programme.

Suggestion 1. Use tasks that orient towards the future

Future-oriented tasks, discussions or projects provide a stimulating framework for engaging students' imaginations regarding their future selves and may encourage students to envision themselves as L2 speakers. Teachers may help this process "by increasing mindfulness about the significance of the ideal self in general and guiding them through a number of possible selves that they have entertained in their minds in the past" (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011, p. 131). Although thinking about their future selves does not necessarily mean that students will decide to become English-speakers, the fact that such activities take place in English class will help build the status of the subject. Possible themes for exploration in future-oriented activities include the medium and long-term futures of students, their friends, families, schools, countries and the world. In addition, thinking about imaginary situations (e.g. "What would you do if...?"-type activities) provide scope for creativity and fun.

I would, however, like to add a caveat to the preceding suggestions. In my view, there is at times a conflict between thinking earnestly about the future while engaging in explicit L2 practice. To put it simply, students' L2 is quite often insufficient to facilitate meaningful exchanges on more serious topics, and the teacher is consequently forced to water down activities to too facile a level to permit real in-depth consideration of self-related issues. For this reason, I would encourage the principled use of the first language (L1) in the class in which potential motivational advantages of an activity outweigh the short-term loss of time spent in the L2. This could be particularly true of activities that seek to achieve steps 2-6 of Dörnyei and Ushioda's (2011) programme.

Suggestion 2. Explore culture and cultural identity in class

An important aspect of an imagined ideal L2 self is presumably an idea of belonging to a community of L2 speakers. To this end, I recommend sharing experiences of cultural exchange in an honest environment. For example, some of my students find it fascinating to hear me talk about my wife (who is Japanese) and the mundane matters of my household. Teachers will differ in their desire to keep a professional distance between personal life and work, but they should try at least to avoid the type of interaction illustrated in the following example:

Student: I am feeling bad. My grandfather he die last week and I am …

Teacher: No - not "die" - say "died" because it's in the past. (Scrivener, 1994)

The principle of exploring culture can be extended to bringing in role models (for example Japanese speakers of English) to class to relate their experiences. In addition, Dörnyei and Murphey (2004) recommend collecting common stereotypes and prejudices about the L2 speakers and discussing how valid they are; bringing various cultural products (e.g., magazines, music, chocolates) to class, and finding L2 pen-friends for students. Textbooks that present a stereotypical, artificially clean, image

of foreign cultures or of the Japanese/foreign dichotomy are best avoided, or at least critically dissected in class and either supplanted or supplemented with more realistic representations of foreign culture.

Suggestion 3. Set a good example

One of the most effective ways in which teachers can promote the idea that the L2 community (in the case of English, a broad and diverse one) is something worthwhile aspiring to be part of is by setting a good example as a representative of said community. For native teachers, this means making an extra effort to satisfy local expectations of professionalism, specifically standards of punctuality, enthusiasm, hard-work, empathy, approachability, and personal appearance. It also involves suppressing any urges to express frustration towards cultural differences, instead either showing tolerance or a willingness to honestly discuss frustrations without being judgemental.

Society

Seeing the "big picture" perspective of motivation in a given context entails a consideration of the social, cultural and educational macro-environment and the complex relationship between Japanese people and English language education in general. Many students in Japan can be seen as lacking a "minimum motivational profile" (Edmundson, 2004). One likely cause of this situation is an exam-based educational culture, in which learning is something one engages in (or more cynically, *plays at*) to earn a course credit or pass a test. English education in Japan has tended to add support to the argument that exam-based education is particularly ill-suited to the acquisition of a second language.

It could also be argued that another cause of low motivation among students is that the Japanese have never had a concrete need, en masse, for practical English skills. The assumption that they *do* (or at least will in the future) forms the basis of English education policy in the country. Unfortunately this policy appears largely to be based on vague proclamations about the inevitable trend of globalisation and, somewhat bizarrely, the opinions of 20 anonymous "experts from various fields" (Ministry of Education, Culture, Science and Technology [MEXT], 2003).

An awareness of the macro-context should lead teachers to better understand those students who study English primarily because they have to, not because they want to. Teachers should also find themselves in a better position to empathise with those students who may be motivated to learn by the opportunities that high test scores provide, rather than an intrinsic interest in English itself.

Suggestion 1. Use educational and institutional context to inform pedagogy

It is important for teachers to enrich planning, implementation and assessment of lessons with an awareness of how things are traditionally done within the local context. For example, if students are not generally expected to proffer answers in class unless directly addressed by name, then it should come as no surprise if they try to avoid doing so; their behaviour is not deviant, but normal. If we wish students to volunteer answers then we will need to explain the thinking behind it, and introduce it as a normative behaviour carefully and slowly.

Similarly, an awareness of context should lead teachers to adopt a critical stance towards potential shortcomings of the formal writings on pedagogy such as a Western-centric approach, Ideal World-ism, or a tendency to treat learners as statistical conglomerates rather than as real people. A lot of teaching material unfortunately lives in an ideal world where students are

sufficiently motivated to simply get on with learning as long as teachers take a reasonable amount of care in planning interesting lessons.

Context of a different kind can guide our thinking about the ultimate aims of language learning. Language learning is a life-long activity if done properly, and so an important context to bear in mind is that of the lives of students, and the correspondingly minuscule proportion of which they spend in our classes. Unfortunately, pressure to prepare students for tests shifts teachers' emphasis from "the process–the extent of learner involvement and enjoyment–to the product, that is, to producing fast and tangible outcomes" (Dörnyei, 2001, p. 72). By shifting the emphasis back to an enjoyment of process rather than the accomplishment of outcomes, or products, we can maintain a healthier balance between short-term (efficiency) goals such as following tidy curricula, to the long term goal of helping to make language learning an intrinsically valued part of students' lives (should they wish so). Given a sufficient command of Japanese on the part of the teacher, these are all interesting issues that can be raised with students of all levels.

Suggestion 2. Consult other teachers, including those writing outside the formal constraints of research literature

Advice from teachers in the field is by nature often more relevant to local context than advice from books on pedagogy, and should be sought when needed. Similarly, viewpoints standing outside of the formal literature may serve to furnish teachers with good ideas that work better in the real world than many in the world of theory. In a newspaper article entitled "What makes a Great Teacher?", Gilbert (2010) writes about what he considers to be four effective teacher types. The *despot*, he claims, can get very good results out of students; *Carers*, often women, become surrogate mothers for their students; The *charmer* gets by on little planning but gets away with things because the students like him; and the *rebel* holds sometimes controversial views, but inspires students to fight against perceived injustices in life. Gilbert's article is provocative in a way that journal articles cannot afford to be, and serves to stimulate discussion and debate. We would not generally associate a despotic approach to be in tune with the literature on motivational teaching practice (Dörnyei, 2001). However, teachers are flawed individuals, not a collection of characteristics that can be rearranged at will. They therefore have to play to their own strengths, and concepts such as Gilbert's four intuitively familiar teacher-types may well ring true to many teachers and provide interesting starting points for a consideration of their own teaching styles.

It is also true that teachers can benefit, by experience, from bad advice as well as good advice, as long as they maintain a critical stance towards received wisdom and pedagogical orthodoxy, and cultivate conditions in class under which the teacher, as well as the students, are allowed to experiment and make mistakes as part of the learning process.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have made ten suggestions for teachers looking to motivate large groups of students. Unlike other lists (Dörnyei & Csizer, 1998; Dörnyei, 2001), these suggestions are not intended to constitute an exhaustive set of motivational tools: There are many other aspects of good teaching, for example, task variety, the principled use of technology, clear and consistent grading, goal setting, etc, that are beyond the scope of this paper. However, I hope that two themes running through this paper may are now apparent to the reader. First, thinking about motivation from multiple perspectives–in this case social, group and individual perspectives–can serve as a helpful guide to the

motivational landscape for teachers. The second theme underlies a (broadly speaking) humanistic approach that I believe would inform the teaching of compulsory English classes better than current test-based thinking. It is that efficiency should not be the primary guiding principle of language learning. As Maley (2010) wryly observes, there is little that we consider enriching to our lives that we seek to do *efficiently:* we don't catch up with an old friend *efficiently,* eat a delicious meal *efficiently,* or read a good novel *efficiently.* Efficiency in the form of short-term, concrete goals and objectives should play a proportionate role in education if it is to be a life-long, life-enriching process. In order to be maximally motivating, language learning should be savoured, enjoyed, perhaps done slowly, but above all done well–not necessarily efficiently.

Further reading

For the theoretical underpinnings of L2 motivation and group dynamics research see *Teaching and researching motivation* (2011, Dörnyei & Ushioda) and *Group dynamics* (Dörnyei & Murphey, 2003). For a comprehensive guide to motivating students, see *Motivational strategies in the language classroom* (Dörnyei, 2001). For practical ideas for the classroom, see the Cambridge Language Teachers' series, in particular *Keep talking: Fluency activities for language teaching (Klippel, 1985)*; *Laughing matters: Humor in the language classroom (Medgyes, 2002)*, and *Drama techniques: A resource book of communication activities for language teachers* (Duff & Maley, 2005).

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