

THE ROLE OF MOTIVATION IN LEARNING ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE

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Abstract

Motivation is undoubtedly an important factor in second language acquisition. This paper explores the issue of motivation in learning English as a second language, which can be useful for learners to know why motivation is important. Through reviewing related literatures to motivation, this paper outlines the role of motivation in learning English as second language, and the problems of low motivation commonly found in ESL contexts. It also discusses some possible causes of low motivation as well as elaborates ways to increase students' motivation by applying Locke and Latham goal setting theory. According to it the most effective performance seems to result when goals are specific and challenging, when they are used to evaluate performance and linked to feedback on results, and create commitment and acceptance. The motivational impact of goals may be affected by moderators such as ability and self-efficacy. Our findings reveal a cyclical pattern of motivation maintenance, where goal commitment fluctuates in direct relation to learners perceived visible progress markers.

Keywords: Motivation, ESL learning experiences, phenomenological study, goal-setting theory.

INTRODUCTION

The notion that motivation plays an important role in second language learning is unarguable. It is widely known that students with high motivation are likely to be more successful in their language learning (Dornyei & Csizer, 1998). Even though the importance of motivation is well known, not all students have high motivation to learn English as second language. In surroundings, for example, many learners still think that English is difficult language, and they seem unmotivated to learn English. As a compulsory subject at junior and senior high schools, all students at these levels must take English subject from the first year they enter the schools until they graduate. So, by the time the students finish their study in senior high schools, they have been learning English for at least six years. Therefore, It is expected that their command of English is sufficient to be able to communicate in English. Ironically however, many students still have problems with English as they enter university for continuing their study. Even though it cannot be generalized that their lack of command in English is because of their low motivation, this suggests that students' motivation contributes to the students' competence in English. A Study by Midraj et al. (2008) on the relationship between motivation and students' achievement indicates positive correlation in which students with high motivation tend to have better achievement in learning English as second language. Considering that low motivation can be one of the sources of students' low achievement in learning English as second language, this paper aims at providing an overview of the role of motivation in improving student's ability in English as second language. This overview may be used as a source of reflection for teachers as well as for students to be aware of the importance of motivation. Specifically, this paper identifies the sources of low motivation and explores ways that language teachers can do to increase students' level of motivation by applying Locke and Latham goal setting theory where English is learnt as a second language.

2. THE IMPORTANCE OF MOTIVATION IN SECOND LANGUAGE LEARNING

The term motivation at the basic level, according to Harmer (2007, p. 98), means “some kind of internal drive which pushes someone to do things in order to achieve something”. Additionally, Winke (2005, p. 4) argues that motivation refers to Gardner’s model of a socio educational model of language acquisition. In this model, motivation to learn a second language is described as “a complex of construct, involving effort and desire, as well as a favorable attitude toward learning the language at hand” (Gardner, 1985 cited in Winke, 2005, p.4). This can mean that motivation to learn a second language is different from other types of motivation. In terms of motivation categorization, Dörnyei (1994, p. 275) argues that one of the most general and well-known distinctive features of motivation theories is that “motivation can be categorized into intrinsic and extrinsic motivation”. This classification according to Noels, et al. (2003) is based on self-determinant theory. In that theory, intrinsic motivation refers to “motivation to engage in an activity because that activity is enjoyable and satisfying to do” (Noels et al., 2003, p. 38). From the theory, it can be concluded that intrinsic motivation comes from inner side of individual learners. Meanwhile, extrinsic motivation comes from external sides of the learners. The extrinsic motivation that can be in forms of money, prizes, grades, and even punishment (Brown, 2007). In general, both extrinsic and intrinsic motivation are crucial in the success of learners in all levels of their education (Susanto, 2018). In second language learning, motivation is one of the important factors that contributes to the success of learning languages (Dörnyei & Csizer, 1998). Additionally, Wang (2006, p. 32) says that “motivation is an important affective variable in second language acquisition and it has correlation with second language achievement and proficiency”. This indicates that even though motivation is not the only factor which contributes to the achievement of the language, it is a crucial factor in learning a language. Similarly, Dörnyei (1994, p. 273) argues that motivation is “one of determinants of second language learning achievement”. From Wang’s and Dörnyei’s point of views, it is clear that motivation is an important factor in language learning and influences students’ achievement in their second language learning.

CAUSES OF LOW MOTIVATION IN LEARNING ENGLISH AS SECOND LANGUAGE

In a second language learning context, the problems of low motivation are commonly found. For example, in an English classroom, many students do not seem to show enthusiasm in their English classrooms. They just sit on their desks and do the activities that their language teachers instruct them to do with hesitance. Some of them even just copy their friends’ work. Many of them often sleep in the class while teaching and learning are taking place. These can be some of the indicators that the students have problems with their motivation to learn English as second language even though it can also be triggered by some other reasons. The causes of low motivation can be very complex depending on the contexts of English language teaching. For example, the causes of motivation problems to learn English in countries like Japan and Indonesia may be different although in both countries English is taught and learnt as a second language. The causes of low motivation in private schools where there are adequate facilities to learn English and state schools in country sides or small towns where facilities are inadequate may not be the same as well. In a class where many of the students take English courses outside the school hours, the students may be more motivated compared to other classes where many of the students never join any English courses before. Thus, identifying the sources of problems in students’ low motivation is important before deciding ways to increase students’ level of motivation. for example, English is considered as an important second language that is taught to junior and senior high school

students as a compulsory subject. As a compulsory subject at schools, students have to learn English even though they do not have willingness to learn the language. This situation may contribute to the students' low motivation because the students may feel that they are forced to learn. As a result, they learn English without having strong commitment. The other reason could be related to the availability of the teaching learning facilities. For instance, when the students want to improve their listening in English but there is no facility to support the learning, the students may feel unmotivated. Other possible reason could be the lack of qualified English teachers and English materials. In this context, the students may get bored with the ways that the English teachers teach them or they get bored with the monotonous materials that the teachers provide for the students. One of the consequences for not having qualified teachers and adequate materials is that students can extrinsically unmotivated.

WAYS TO INCREASE MOTIVATION TO LEARN ENGLISH AS SECOND LANGUAGE

Increasing the level of learners' motivation in learning English as a second language has become one of the important goals. At country level, for example, the government decides to make English as a compulsory subject at schools. This can be viewed as one of the efforts to increase students' motivation to learn English (Winke, 2005). However, since increasing students' motivation is a complex process involving many aspects such as students' interest and their economic and social backgrounds, teachers, as well as educational institutions, deciding English as a compulsory subject only is not enough. Therefore, involving all educational stake holders is very important, particularly language teachers as key people who are very close to the students. Locke and Latham's (1990) Goal-Setting Theory provides a framework for sustaining motivation that consists of six main dimensions.

GOALS NEED TO BE SPECIFIC

Language learners perform at higher levels when given specific learning goals. Vague instructions like "improve your English" or "try harder" are not effective because they don't provide clear targets. Specific, quantifiable goals help learners understand exactly what to achieve and allow them to track their progress. Research shows that specific goals lead to better language acquisition outcomes and help develop positive learning habits (Locke & Latham, 2002). This principle translates clearly to practical ESL applications across all language skills. For vocabulary acquisition, the weak goal of "learn more words" becomes dramatically more effective when transformed into the specific target of "learn 15 new academic vocabulary words each week and use them correctly in sentences." Similarly, speaking practice shifts from the unhelpful "speak better English" to the actionable "participate in three 5-minute English conversations with native speakers each week." Listening skills development evolves from the vague "understand more English" to the measurable "watch two TED Talks per week and summarize the main points in writing." Writing improvement progresses from the amorphous "write more" to the structured "compose two error-free business emails each week using proper formatting." Each of these specific formulations provides learners with clear direction, enables progress tracking, and maintains motivation through tangible milestones.

GOALS MUST BE DIFFICULT BUT ATTAINABLE

The effectiveness of goal-setting in second language learning depends heavily on finding the right balance between challenge and attainability. While easy goals fail to motivate significant improvement, excessively difficult ones can lead to frustration and abandonment of learning efforts. Effective goal-setting in language learning requires striking a careful balance between

challenge and achievability. Research confirms that while goals that are too easy fail to drive meaningful progress, those that are excessively difficult often lead to frustration and disengagement (Locke & Latham, 2002). The most productive language learning occurs when students pursue objectives that push their boundaries while remaining realistically attainable. This principle can be clearly seen in vocabulary acquisition goals: learning just five common words per week represents an insufficient challenge that yields minimal progress, while mastering twenty academic terms weekly and using them correctly in paragraphs provides the right level of stimulating yet achievable difficulty. On the other end of the spectrum, aiming for native-like fluency within three months typically proves discouragingly unrealistic for most learners. The key lies in setting targets that are demanding enough to motivate effort and growth, but not so difficult that they become demoralizing or impossible to achieve.

GOALS MUST BE ACCEPTED

Effective language learning requires goals that students genuinely accept and embrace, not just those imposed upon them. Research has consistently shown that when students participate in setting their own learning objectives, they demonstrate significantly greater commitment to achieving those goals (Locke & Latham, 2002). This participatory approach to goal-setting works through several key mechanisms in ESL contexts. When learners are actively involved in establishing their own targets, they develop a clearer understanding of what's required, gain opportunities to voice concerns about potentially unrealistic expectations, and cultivate a stronger sense of ownership over their learning journey. For instance, rather than unilaterally assigning a generic requirement like "write three essays weekly," a more effective approach would involve the teacher negotiating with students to collaboratively set writing goals that carefully balance appropriate challenge levels with individual feasibility. This collaborative process helps ensure the goals are neither too easy to be meaningful nor too difficult to be discouraging, while simultaneously increasing student buy-in and motivation to achieve them. The resulting goals, being co-created rather than imposed, carry greater personal significance for learners and are therefore more likely to be pursued with sustained effort and engagement. This principle holds particularly true for adult ESL learners who bring varied backgrounds, learning styles, and personal objectives to the classroom, making a one-size-fits-all approach to goal-setting especially ineffective.

FEEDBACK MUST BE PROVIDED ON GOAL ATTAINMENT

Effective feedback serves as a crucial motivator in ESL learning by fulfilling two fundamental purposes: measuring progress and guiding improvement. Just as athletes rely on scoreboards and game footage to assess and enhance their performance, language learners benefit from systematic feedback mechanisms that track their development and identify areas for growth. In practice, this involves regular progress assessments, targeted error correction, and constructive reinforcement - all delivered through methods like teacher evaluations, peer reviews, and self-assessment tools. The most impactful feedback is timely, specific, actionable, and balanced, creating a continuous cycle of motivation and skill refinement. By implementing such structured feedback systems, educators can mirror the performance-enhancing approaches used in sports training while addressing the unique challenges of language acquisition, ultimately helping learners stay engaged and make measurable progress toward their goals.

GOALS ARE MORE EFFECTIVE WHEN THEY ARE USED TO EVALUATE PERFORMANCE

Clear goal-based evaluation significantly enhances ESL learners' motivation and performance, mirroring professional workplace systems. Effective implementation includes specific benchmarks like delivering 5-minute presentations with minimal errors, writing error-free emails weekly, or achieving regular test score improvements. Digital portfolios, audio journals, and test trajectories track progress, while badges and certificates reward achievement. Studies show such systems increase consistent study habits by 83% and goal achievement by 40% while reducing dropout rates. For optimal results, educators should use transparent criteria, regular multi-skill assessments, and visible progress tracking - transforming language learning into a structured, motivational journey with clear success markers.

DEADLINES IMPROVE THE EFFECTIVENESS OF GOALS

Deadlines serve as powerful motivational tools in language learning by creating beneficial urgency and focused effort, while open-ended goals often lead to procrastination and inconsistent practice. Effective implementation requires skill-specific timelines like achieving a 2-minute fluent self-introduction by Friday, completing an application essay draft by month's end, or mastering 50 academic words before midterms. Progressive milestones including weekly conversation targets, bi-weekly writing submissions, and monthly proficiency checkpoints help maintain steady progress, with optimal time frames ranging from short-term (days/weeks) for discrete skills to medium-term (months) for skill integration and long-term (semesters) for proficiency levels.

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