



Motivation and Young ESL Learners

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ABSTRACT

Successful language learning requires a high level of motivation. Since a second language is not the learners' native tongue and is learnt mostly in a formal instructional setting, motivation becomes a crucial factor in second language learning. Moreover, young ESL (English as a Second Language) learners are unaware of the value of learning a second language. Therefore, teachers must create motivational conditions in the young ESL classroom by employing various motivational tactics. Generating motivation in young learners becomes more crucial because early motivational conditions significantly impact the later phase of teaching and learning. Only if they have had a good experience with their initial phase of language learning, young ESL learners would put effort into their future L2 (second language) learning. Young L2 learners are more dependent on their L2 teachers because they are in the early stage of the learning process. Teachers must build a positive relationship with young learners to understand their problems. When the teacher provides a positive and favourable learning atmosphere in the classroom, young learners feel driven to learn (Dörnyei, 2001). Further, a 'stimulating and pleasant' learning environment 'breaks the monotony of classroom happenings' (Waddington, 2018). This paper discusses the multiple factors that decide the motivation levels of young ESL learners.

Keywords: Motivation, Young ESL Learners, Language learning, Teacher, Classroom

Introduction

Motivation refers to the desire to do or learn something. The word 'motivation' is derived from the Latin word 'movere', which means 'to move.' Motivation directs us to act, learn, and instruct in a desirable way (McDonough, 2007). Dörnyei (2001) defines motivation as "an abstract, hypothetical concept that we use to explain why people think and behave as they do" (p. 1). Motivation encompasses "why people decide to do something, how hard they are going to pursue it and how long they are willing to sustain the activity" (Dörnyei, 2001, p.8). According to Gardner, "the motivated individual is goal-directed, expends effort, is persistent, is attentive, has desires (wants), exhibits positive affect, is aroused, has expectancies, demonstrates self-confidence (self-efficacy), and has reasons (motives)" (2007, p. 15). Motivation is not an impulse but a constant urge to achieve certain goals, which develops a positive attitude towards learning. Young learners feel motivated to learn in the classroom when the teacher creates a favourable and conducive learning environment inside the classroom (Dörnyei, 2001). Therefore, teachers need to make the learning environment "stimulating and

enjoyable...breaking the monotony of classroom events” (Waddington, 2018). This paper aims to highlight the major factors that affect the motivation level of young ESL (English as a Second Language) learners.

Motivation in Second Language Learning

Motivation is an essential requirement for successful language learning. Deepa (2020) highlights that “motivation is the one variable in the absence of which no learning can happen” (p. 40). Teaching and learning can take place effectively only when students are motivated to learn. However, it is usually challenging to generate motivation in the ESL classroom and maintain it for a longer period. Dörnyei (2001) believes that “motivation needs to be actively nurtured” (p. 71), which must be done by creating a formal or informal environment where learners feel free to participate in the teaching-learning process actively. Further, for successful ESL classroom learning, teachers must practice self-motivating strategies first, as it is equally vital for them to motivate themselves before applying the L2 motivational strategies to the learners (p. 31). Motivation in second language acquisition (SLA) is multifaceted; it comprises integrative, instrumental, extrinsic, and intrinsic motivation.

Extrinsic, Intrinsic, Integrative and Instrumental Motivation

Robert Gardner introduced the idea of Instrumental and Integrative orientation in the year 1985 (Dörnyei, 2001). Integrative orientation is a type of L2 motivation in which the desire to communicate with and integrate with the L2 community motivates L2 learners. (p. 16). Instrumental orientation occurs when the L2 learners learn for a practical reason, such as being motivated to improve their socio-economic conditions or find better employment opportunities (Dörnyei, 2001). Deci and Ryan (1985) divided motivation into extrinsic and intrinsic. Extrinsic motivation occurs when a learner is motivated to learn because of external factors such as the necessity to learn a language for better job prospects. On the other hand, intrinsic motivation is an internal force, such as a desire to learn without expecting a reward. Nevertheless, both are complementary and interconnected. Thus, motivation is a dynamic concept consisting of many complex phenomena important for second language learning.

Motivational Factors in Second Language Learning

Multiple factors affect the motivation level of L2 learners. The following are some of the most crucial factors:

- **Willingness to Communicate:** Proficiency in a second or foreign language depends on the speaker’s willingness to communicate (WTC) (Darasawang & Reinders, 2021). The lack of communication skills of many L2 learners results from avoiding “L2 communication situations” (Dörnyei, 2001). To become proficient in a language, one must always be prepared to participate in a communicative discourse (p. 13).
- **Attitude:** A positive attitude towards the L2 community is an essential part of L2 motivation (Oroujlou & Vahedi, 2011). It is believed that people tend to learn from each other when there is a positive feeling among them (Guerrero, 2015).
- **Needs and Interests:** It is imperative to understand the needs and interests of the learners for successful language teaching. It is possible to determine the student’s interest level through one-to-one interviews and open-ended discussions. In this way, the L2 teacher can understand the students’ general perception, and accordingly, significant changes can be introduced and implemented as per the students’ needs (p. 65). A teacher may do multiple things to make the classroom environment enjoyable, such as conducting new and innovative activities that increase learners’ interest and satisfaction (Dörnyei, 2001).
- **Monotony:** Repeating the same thing in the classroom creates boredom; therefore, teaching strategies should not be monotonous. Engaging L2 learners actively in the classroom is a crucial instrument in breaking the monotony of the ESL classroom (p. 72).

- **Sense of Accomplishment:** Success in achieving something or a sense of accomplishment motivates individuals to act. A teacher should recognise and appreciate even the little achievements of the students; it will help the students maintain motivation for the long term (Dörnyei, 2001).
- **Learning Objectives:** The objectives of second language learning should be discussed clearly to achieve the intended goals (p. 45). According to Deepa (2020), “a poor understanding of the learning objectives may reduce learners’ motivation and will to succeed” (p. 45).
- **Self-Belief:** ESL teachers have to ensure that the learner’s self-esteem is not compromised in any situation. Dörnyei (2001) states that “self-esteem and self-confidence are like the foundations of a building: if they are not secure enough, even the best technology will be insufficient to build solid walls over them” (p. 87).
- **Teachers:** In a second language classroom, learners consider teachers as their role models; therefore, teachers need to maintain appropriate behaviour to motivate the learners (Dörnyei, 2001). The teacher has to be enthusiastic, committed and live up to the expectation of the learners (p. 32- 34).
- **Feedback:** Feedback has a tremendous motivational effect on learners (Deepa, 2020). It is natural for humans to expect appreciation for their work, which may motivate them to continue their efforts. The feedback given by L2 teachers plays an instrumental role in the learners’ progress towards success or failure. Feedback can include patting on the back, rewards, prizes, ‘stars’, tokens or descriptive and numerical grades or scores. Positive feedback can help motivate the learners; however, the L2 teachers must be judicious while providing a tangible or intangible reward (Dörnyei, 2001, p. 123-124). For instance, if a learner is praised for doing nothing, it can hamper the learning process. Hence, teachers should provide the learners with information and feedback that helps them attain their goals.
- **Learning Environment:** Learners feel motivated in a positive learning environment free from anxiety, discomfort, fear, shame etc. Language learners often face many language-related issues, such as embarrassment to speak in front of their friends, fear of punishment if they make mistakes, etc. Teachers can eliminate these challenges by providing a supportive and motivating learning environment where each L2 learner can thrive and develop holistically (Deepa, 2020).
- **Social Environment:** Teaching and learning a language do not occur only in a formal setting. Dörnyei (2001) emphasised that the social environment is equally important in language learning. In schools, learners are taught grammatical or structural aspects of a language, but it is in the social event/environment where the learners incorporate a wide range of L2 elements while interacting with their friends and observing different aspects of languages being used in different contexts (p. 15).
- **Emotional Aspect:** The emotional aspect is also an essential factor in establishing a positive classroom environment. Sometimes, certain emotions or moods - such as anxiety, fear, and hopelessness - can inhibit or disrupt the learning attitude (Dörnyei, 2001). The environment of home and school determines the emotional state of the learners. If the learners’ parents do not motivate the learner and the relationship between the parents or between parents and child is dreadful, it will negatively affect their emotional status. Similarly, the classroom or school environment also needs to be motivating. If the teacher and the student’s relationship is hostile and the teachers do not support the child, it may adversely affect the child. The relationship with the peer group is also essential because doing something cooperatively on the same goal makes the task easier and helps them build a positive relationship among the learners (Dörnyei, 2001). In such a scenario, it is assumed that learning will not occur successfully. Thus, a stable emotional setup is essential for success in education and language learning.

Motivation and Young ESL Learners

Young ESL learners refer to learners at the primary level who are mainly in the 6-11 years age group. It is believed that young language learners naturally have a high level of motivation for any kind of learning. However, Hardi and Nikolov (as quoted in Gabriella, 2014) have shown that young language learners’ motivation is shaped mainly by their classroom experiences, their teachers’ influence, and their friends and peers (Gabriella,

2014). Nikolov (1999) claims that children often show more willingness to participate in interesting activities and perform exciting tasks, i.e. if they are driven by intrinsic motivation. Other kinds of motivation, such as passing a test or examination, to be promoted to secondary school or to get admission in a more reputed school, etc. i.e. instrumental motivation comes at a much later stage. He also suggests that the influence of integrative motivation on young language learners is minimal.

As young ESL learners are unaware of the value of learning a second language, the teachers need to develop interest amongst the students by sharing their personal interest in learning the language with the students (Dörnyei, 2001). Further, the teachers need to generate the motivational conditions in the ESL classroom using different motivational strategies. Because they are still in the early stages of their learning, young L2 students are more reliant on their L2 instructors. To comprehend the issues faced by young students, instructors must establish a good rapport with them. According to Dörnyei (2001), “teachers who share warm, personal interactions with their students, who respond to their concerns in an empathic manner and who succeed in establishing relationships of mutual trust and respect with the learners, are more likely to inspire them in academic matters than those who have no personal ties with the learners” (p. 36)

According to Spithill (1980), the teacher’s role is vital in maintaining motivation in language classrooms. She mentions that the teacher acts as a gardener, and to motivate the students, teachers must motivate themselves first (p. 72). The teacher’s self-motivation gets reflected through the following characteristics: empathy, patience, warmth, and positive reinforcement. Further, the teacher must create an anxiety-free environment for young language learners. They have to constantly remind the learners that the path of learning a second language is long and complicated, but not impossible (p. 73). The following are certain assumptions and principles pertinent to the creation of a positive learning environment for young ESL learners:

- Young ESL learners learn in a better way through the play-way method.
- Young ESL learners learn better when teaching strategies include physical engaging activities.
- ESL teachers should eliminate the hostile environment and build confidence among young learners.
- ESL teachers should accept the learners’ mistakes and encourage them to speak in English.
- The learning environment should be democratic, where every young learner can participate.

The ESL classroom environment is totally dependent upon the teacher; therefore, they have to be careful of their actions and accept their learners’ abilities with a non-judgemental outlook (Spithill, 1980). Too much rigidity of the teacher may demotivate the learners. Young learners will improve when the teaching and learning environment is exciting and motivating. After generating motivational conditions for the young learners, the teachers need to proceed to another step, i.e. developing a positive attitude and vision in the young learners. Then, the ESL teachers should proceed from the vision to the actual goals that the learners should achieve (Hadfield and Dörnyei, 2014, p. 106). The teacher should develop short-term goals, for instance, learning two words daily. Learners who can achieve certain goals should be appreciated and motivated for their efforts. Appreciation shapes a positive attitude toward learning.

Motivation does not occur only inside the classroom. The social environment is also an essential factor in successful language learning (Deepa, 2020). Young ESL learners learn much from the social environment; communicating in English with friends and parents, responses and appreciation from society, watching English cartoon programmes, and reading comics, all these aspects greatly influence the motivation of young ESL learners. The ESL teachers also need to communicate with the parents of young learners and guide them. Dörnyei (2001) states that “for most children their parents’ opinion matters, and therefore parents can be powerful allies in any motivational effort” (p. 39). The parents should be informed about the importance of the English language. If the parents and teachers show great enthusiasm, the learners will imbibe a positive attitude towards learning the English language.

The proficiency of second language learners at the primary level is influenced by the environment where the learners live. A social environment is where learners interact and communicate with different

linguistic communities. For instance, if the learner's society is hostile to the L2 community, it is then possible that learners might not be interested in learning it. Similarly, a lack of avenues to communicate in English can pose difficulties for ESL learners to become proficient in the language. The social environment can be positive as well as harmful for ESL learners. For instance, people making fun of the learner while speaking English will negatively affect the ESL learner. Therefore, teachers should appropriately manage the internal or external factors.

The building of early motivational conditions determines the later phase of teaching and learning. Therefore, the language learning experience they have received at the primary level must motivate the young learners (Hadfield & Dörnyei, 2014). Young ESL learners will only put effort into their future L2 learning if they have a positive experience from their previous language education. If ESL learners are not motivated in their early education, doing better in future L2 learning becomes difficult. Dörnyei (2001) states that young learners at the primary level are at the "developmental stage when their self-image is in an ongoing flux, and doubts and worries about oneself are more common feelings than confidence or pride" (p. 87). Therefore, it becomes crucial for ESL teachers to motivate young learners by maintaining and creating a positive environment in the classroom. The classroom should provide a safer, friendly, engaging, and active environment where learning can occur comfortably. The classroom environment should be stimulating and enjoyable, where every young L2 learner can learn successfully (p. 72). Since the teachers are aware of the classroom situation, they can find out the challenges faced by the learners. Accordingly, the problems should be resolved so that learning can occur without obstacles. Considering the needs and interests of young ESL learners, teachers need to employ the most appropriate methods and strategies to help them.

Conclusion

Learning without motivation can be a mechanical process. In the absence of motivation, learners may fail to attain the expected level of proficiency to use the language creatively in any given situation. Teachers of young ESL learners must be sensitive to the fact that young learners are unaware of the importance or benefits of learning a second or foreign language. To motivate young learners in the ESL classroom, teachers must understand the various factors affecting motivation and accordingly employ different motivational strategies appropriate for the learners. As per the needs and interests of the learners, they may need to move beyond textbooks and other traditional aspects of teaching to make the learning environment exciting and motivating for the young ESL learners.

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