

Lifting Motivation Level of English Learners in Saudi Arabia

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Abstract

Teaching processes differ across place, and generation. Language teaching, in particular, has more differences as a result of different teaching contexts. Teaching English as a second language in a native English-speaking country is not the same as teaching English as a foreign language in a non-native English-speaking country. English teaching in Saudi Arabia encounters many difficulties. One of the huge issues that faced the teachers of English is the learners' low motivation that depends on their psychological, social, and attitudinal states. Motivation is a result of the intersection of many factors such as personality, socialization, behavior, school context, and interaction. This paper aims at creating a supportive environment for both teachers and students to succeed in this context. It is twofold. The first part, which leads to the second, displays the importance of motivation in language learning and teaching. The second explains how to lift motivation levels between learners in Saudi Arabia by suggesting some steps to raise the motivation level in the Saudi context.

Keywords: Motivation, EFL, ESL, Context, English Saudi Arabia

Introduction

Teaching processes differ from place to place and generation to generation. Language teaching, in particular, has more differences as a result of different teaching contexts. There is a difference between teaching a language in its context and out of its contexts. For example, teaching English as a second language (ESL) in a native English-speaking country is not the same as teaching English as a foreign language (EFL) in a non-native English-speaking country. EFL teaching in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) encounters many difficulties. One of the huge issues is the learners' low motivation that depends on their psychological, social, and attitudinal states. Motivation is a result of the intersection of many factors such as personality, socialization, behavior, school context, and interaction. As a professional, I must always consider how to face the low-level of motivation that may exist amongst students. Beside extensive teaching experience and linguistic knowledge, I argue that EFL teachers need more to address this challenge.

This paper aims at creating a supportive environment for both teachers and students to succeed in the EFL context in the KSA. It is a letter to myself and my colleagues in that context. It is twofold. The first part, which leads to the second, displays the importance of motivation in language learning and teaching. The second explains how to lift motivation levels in EFL learners in the KSA. In other words, I utilize the importance of motivation in the first part as a foundation to demonstrate how to boost motivation level. In this second half, which is the main argument, I suggest specific required steps to raise the motivation level in the Saudi context although there are lots of steps which could be taken to do this.

My suggestions mainly attend to EFL teachers in the KSA by including the parents and students' attitude, teacher's abilities and preparation, teaching methods and tasks, teacher-learners relationship, mass media and the Internet, and learner's self-confidence and autonomy. Since language learning is the result of interacting variables, my steps move from general to specific, from outside the classroom to inside it, from before the lesson to in it and to after it. These steps are "external, introjected, identified, and integrated" (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002, p. 113).

Importance of motivation in EFL context

I could define motivation as a reason that inspires a behavior of willingness and volition. Motivation involves beliefs, values, interests, perceptions, and, actions. Yule (2006) states that "motivation may be as much a result of success as a cause" (p. 168). Volition, according to Eccles and Wigfield (2002) refers to "both the strength of will needed to complete a task and the diligence of pursuit" (p. 126).

Educational psychologists recognize the importance of motivation to support student learning in general and language acquisition in particular. They concentrate on using it as a very important cause to involve the affective goals in order to influence the degree of effort that learner makes to learn English. Affective goals are concerned with the students' attitudes toward themselves, learning, and English language as a subject at school in the EFL context.

Motivation is not only a major factor but also has a powerful influence on English learning and acquisition. This is true whether intrinsic or extrinsic or instrumental and integrative motivation. For example, Gardner and Lambert (1972) show that success in a foreign language is likely to be lower if the underlying motivational orientation is instrumental rather than integrative. They think that an integrative orientation would sustain better the long-term motivation needed for the very demanding task of language learning.

It is a matter of fact that motivation is seen as an effective element in both teaching and learning English. It contributes to language achievement and linguistic products that usually embrace the structure of the language such as vocabulary, spelling, grammar, pronunciation, and the four skills of the language, including listening, understanding, writing and reading. Gardner (1985) considers motivation as a goal directed and defines it as “the combination of effort plus desire to achieve the goal of learning the language plus favorable attitudes toward learning the language” (p. 10).

In EFL contexts, there is neither enough English input outside the classroom nor opportunities for interaction with native English speakers. Most of the circumstances to successful English language acquisition are lacking. Therefore, motivation in EFL settings is the center of language teaching. This is precisely as Eccles and Wigfield (2002) state that “it is difficult, if not impossible, to understand students’ motivation without understanding the contexts they are experiencing.” (p.128). Zhou (2008) argues that motivation is affected by the learning setting in China, as an EFL context, and if the learners are well guided, they will attain high levels of proficiency in English and progress greatly. Saudi students study English as a compulsory subject. They do not choose to study it, and do not find real-life objectives and uses for it in their society. Therefore, Saudi EFL learners lack the internal force and desire for learning it and have to depend on other external drivers, as I shall soon discuss.

In order to increase and maintain students’ motivation in Saudi Arabia, consequently, my colleagues and I need to create a supportive context. We have to understand that the role of context becomes increasingly essential to motivation theories as well as in many areas of psychology. Recent research shows that the kinds of classroom and school situation are students exposed to greatly influence their motivation and achievement in complex ways (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002). Some proposals in language acquisition research clarify teachers’ understanding of motivation and the specific psychological and behavioral components of motivation that we can influence.

It is unworkable here to include the enormous role of motivation in EFL teaching and learning or to review its large body of literature. However, my previous concise description of the importance of motivation is enough to move into the second phase of the paper where I recommend some practical implications for EFL teachers in the KSA. Based on my experience in this context, these steps support the teachers in their work, enhance the learners' motivation, and create a new EFL context rather than the traditional environments and approaches.

Increasing Motivation level in EFL Learners in the KSA

1. before the classroom

I briefly propose two main steps to be taken outside the classroom or before classes to lift the learners' motivation:

A. Prepare and be updated.

Teachers must have a wide knowledge of education in general and English language in particular to be able to make adjustments in response to new generations, theories, and technologies as well as changeable learners’ needs and teachers' roles. I do not agree with many colleagues who think the university’s years are enough to be successful in teaching and those who see teaching as routine work. It is a changeable and developing practice. EFL teachers, thus, should continue their own readings and findings which do not stop at university graduation. Their teaching approaches must be developed according to their experiences (Brown, 2007)

because students can judge any pattern, seriousness, or preparation in the classroom which, in turn, reflects, positively or negatively, on their motivation.

The teacher is a model for students to use language to communicate with others. The teacher's behavior and organization demonstrate the seriousness of his or her teaching. The teacher's knowledge, experience, and preparation will make the students feel that the teacher is sufficiently equipped and updated to support them. This suggestion will facilitate doing other suggestions, catching the students' attention to the lesson, and increasing their motivation. In other words, the teacher shows the students his or her care for their learning by being well prepared and expecting their achievement (Dornyei, 2001).

B. Develop positive attitudes toward English.

Outside the classroom, there are different attitudes toward the English language. The attitude of the family, parents, or peers to English will affect the student's attitude to learning English. In other words, students' attitudes towards English will be seriously influenced by the people who are around them. The nature and strength of this attitude will have a profound effect on the degree of motivation and whether or not that motivation continues (Harmer, 2007). Most psycholinguists believe that the learner's attitudes plays a major role both in a language learning situation, which is in the classroom, and in a language acquisition context, which is outside the classroom. This step aims to develop a positive and confident attitude toward oneself as a learner, learning to take risks, and to learn from one's mistakes.

In my country, students regard English as a worthless subject because they do not use it in their lives. A lot of parents do not care about their children's progress in the English subject. Since parents are partners in the learning process and play a vital role in the academic life of the students, teachers should work with parents to make sure that English learning is valued at home. Parent-teacher conferences, parents' visits to the school, and teachers' letters to parents are ways to increase the home involvement in the class learning and to develop a collaborative relationship with the learners' parents (Brown, 2007). This cooperation creates social contexts that influence the learners' cognition, perceptions, and involvement with their learning and achievement outcomes (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002). Moreover, students will benefit from this context by developing more positive attitudes and behavior which will drive them forward in their English learning.

2. Inside the classroom

Now, I move my suggestions into the classroom. There are three macro-steps to lift the learners' motivation within the classroom, and to sustain it permanently:

A. Build a good teacher-student relationship.

Building respectful relationships with learners shows teachers the way to make provision for students' needs and expectations. This relationship plays a serious role in the classroom and influences the students' attitudes and behavior toward the activities. If they like the teacher, they will like the lesson and vice versa. The teacher's behavior and manners in the class are responsible for producing a tense or safe classroom. A tense classroom environment is harmful because it will undermine learning and de-motivate learners. On the other hand, learners' motivation will reach its peak in the accommodating classroom atmosphere (Brown, 2007, p. 74) in which students engage in the lesson rather than avoid it.

According to brain research, the learning environment must be safe, supportive, non-threatening, and free from fear (Violand-Sanchez, 1998). Cooperative learning is a natural

extension of these features because it will reduce the learners' fears and anxieties. Teachers have to avoid threats, public criticisms, and punishments, even in their tone of voice because these have shocking effects. Teachers must take care of how to criticize, correct, and give a feedback because it has some influences on students' performance. I recognize how harmful and painful an awful correction can be. There are many strategies for treating the mistakes as an indicator of aspects of a new language that are still being learned. Teachers, for example, can activate self-correct or peer correction and feedback as positive techniques because they are less threatening and more effective than the teacher's. The teacher does not have to be the source of all information about the language. Such a relationship will decrease the language anxiety and increase the impetus for learning.

I think it is not difficult for us to listen actively to what students are saying, let them know that we value their thoughts and contributions to the class, talk with them on a personal level, offer help and support, sit close to them, or walk around the class. This warm and supportive relationship will lead them to achieve "a more positive sense of their control over outcomes" (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002, p. 112). Such emotional mood and friendly behavior is a helpful feature to distinguish the target material from interfering material (Bower, 1991), to fulfill the students' needs, and to enable the EFL teacher to fully engage the learners.

B. Vary your teaching methods.

It is worth mentioning that I use the term 'method' as an umbrella term to refer to approaches, principles, techniques, ways, and styles of teaching. Because there is no one best way to teach and because no method is without shortcomings, English teachers must vary their teaching methods. Each method has advantages over others for teaching specific aspects of the language. Therefore, there is no method that suits all learners and all contexts. According to Brown (2007), EFL teaching is based on "an enlightened eclectic approach" (p. 42), which is formed by contributions from all theories and research.

Varying teaching methods proves the teacher's abilities to direct the students' attention toward the lesson and creates motivating classes which cater to individual differences and different learning styles. These are cognitive styles for learning efficiently and effectively. Students find the manner of such a teacher unexpected because he or she varies his or her techniques. The students will be attracted to the lesson and enjoy its parts as a result of these motivating tactics. In contrast, teaching lessons with the same routine is boring and will destroy the pupils' desire to learn. If the teacher is boring and does not make the lesson exciting, the students often do not like the class. For this reason, teachers need to take into consideration that varying teaching methods contributes effectively to the learners' motivation.

C. Use a variety of activities and materials.

Every class has different students, goals, and components. We, thus, must employ a set of activities in the classroom and use different resources and materials from the classroom or elsewhere. Activities involving moving, thinking, passing things, exchanging information, and so on offer a helpful diversity in the activities of any lesson. It also constructs the students' schema in relation to English learning because it will activate the various elements of language they have stored in their long-term memories in the brains. EFL learners will link their existing linguistics knowledge with the new facts in a meaningful learning process. This process provides what Loftus and Loftus (1980) state as "a high incentive for accurate retrieval" (p. 417).

Using a variety of activities will achieve many goals that cater to different learning styles. Informing the students about the objectives of the activities makes learning interesting and relevant (Nunan, 1999). In addition, it builds some challenging and competitive elements into the lesson, particularly if it moves from “simple to complex learning” (van Merriënboer and Sweller, 2005, p. 155) or from known to unknown. These goals prepare the learners to be motivated in the class and to participate more enthusiastically in different activities.

It is also essential to understand that some students will be motivated by specific activities while other students will be not motivated. Varying the activities maintains the class time for optimal authentic language input and interaction (Brown, 2007; van Merriënboer and Sweller, 2005). It will limit the teacher's talk and increase the learners' talk. This will give the teacher more opportunities to focus attention on particular students. It is beneficial for shy students because it will liberate them to feel that they are not under scrutiny. In addition, it will promote the students' desire for cooperative learning and meaningful negotiation.

3. After the classroom

Let us address what is supposed to happen outside the classroom:

A. Encourage the use of media and the Internet.

The Internet has become an educational standard resource and has undergone explosive growth recently. It supports people interactions with many forms of computer-mediated communications. As the English language is the language of technology, mass media, and the Internet, using technology and accessing the Internet are helpful ways of learning it (Nunan, 1999). This will be more effective in teaching English in the Saudi context. This phenomenon helps to alleviate the difficulties of English learning and compensate for the lack of English use outside the classroom. Teachers have to encourage their students to learn how to use media and the Internet in their education because their own steps taken to learn English are, as Brown (2007, p. 68) states, “as important as teacher's methods or more so.”

Mass communication materials engage learners' metacognitive processes and improve their skills and abilities to use English in different situations. Movies, emails, chatting rooms, and games are examples for activating this idea. These activities are the favorite hobbies of Saudis when they have free time. Thus, teachers can use them for stimulating students to learn English during their leisure. Harmer (2007) argues that students' motivation is “far more likely to remain healthy if they are doing things they enjoy doing” (p. 102). This is exactly the case when students come to class with a belief that English is the only key to watch the Spanish soccer league or the Olympics Games. They are driven to English in order to satisfy their needs and interests, both “feeling-related and value-related interests” (Schiefele, 1999, p.260). It will help the teacher to generate the principles of self-study and autonomy, which is the next step.

B. Support student's self-learning and autonomy.

There is no doubt that the student's role in learning is very effective as said above. Modern teaching sees learners as participants in the learning process and expects them to take some degree of responsibility for their own learning. EFL learners are supposed to use English creatively depending on their beliefs about their competence and efficacy, expectancies for success or failure, and sense of control over outcomes (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002). Brown (2007) emphasizes that the learner's role starts in the classroom with the teacher and continues beyond the classroom and the teacher.

My previous steps are useful factors in building the pupil's self-learning, self-regulation, motivation, and autonomy. For example, using different group activities will build the learners' interpersonal skills or how to learn with others. Interpersonal skills will build the learner's self-confidence and self-efficacy. These skills will enable the learner to take the initiative to use English to interact with his or her classmates or with other people outside the classroom. This will give the learners more confidence to use English to develop their communication skills. On the other hand, teachers could consider communication as a motivation for English learning (Hoff, 2005) and learners' autonomy as a means for raising and maintaining this motivation.

The learners, accordingly, will seek opportunities to put their knowledge and skills of English into practice because they are independent in their studies, can create their language competence, progress in their ability, and develop confidence and motivation to carry on learning (Hedge 2003). By the same token, this will promote the learners' curiosity that leads them to use English to explore the surrounding world. Thus, they are likely to find the learning experience enjoyable. Curiosity works better with self-learning and free choices in safe and supportive contexts. Learners, at this stage, are willing to take chances, or well-calculated risks, in trying out their English or satisfying their curiosity.

Conclusion

Motivation, in the context of learning English, is the student's intent to learn. It is the combination of attempt and desire to accomplish the goal of learning it plus positive attitudes toward learning it. Many goals are related to students' performance and reactions to their school achievement. These goals, according to Eccles and Wigfield (2002), "include seeing oneself as successful, dependable, wanting to learn new things, and wanting to get things done" (p. 110). Therefore, EFL teachers need to be aware of motivation as an essential factor to achieve these goals and how to raise it on the one side and how to maintain it on the other side.

This paper is an outline that has suggested some macro-steps to raise the motivation of students to learn English. My steps start from the learners' attitudes, teacher's office, and move on to the learners themselves, their relationships with the teacher and their efforts in the classroom, and outside it by the uses of media and the Internet. I view these suggestions as main ideas which include sub-steps in their details. These steps are inclusive of other steps particularly when I explain them in details. In other words, many other steps affecting motivation contribute to these main steps. All of these steps lead to each other and work in concert to increase the motivation level of EFL students in the KSA. By following these creative steps I have mentioned, teachers will be able to improve EFL learners' motivation, beliefs, reactions, self-efficacy, self-confidence, and self-regulation.

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