



Using Internet Activities to Increase Student Motivation

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As teachers, we are delighted when our students develop personal interest in the subject that we teach rather than thinking of it only as something that they must do to pass an exam or qualify for promotion. The Internet has the potential to help ESL and EFL students develop an intrinsic interest in learning English. Some students see the Internet as trendy and want to be part of it. Others are attracted by more practical concerns, for example, the opportunity of acquiring useful job skills. Whatever their reasons, many students are excited about using the Internet, and we can capitalize on this excitement.

After several attempts to tap into student interest, I have learned some valuable lessons. One is that teachers must be careful to integrate Internet tasks with class or program instruction. Internet tasks that seem to be extra or supplemental are likely to wither. In busy times, such tasks will seem less important and may even be abandoned by students, teachers, or both. A second lesson that I have learned is that I must be willing to provide or arrange computer skills training for many of my students. Despite the number of Internet connected computers available to them now, in a recent semester, only two of my 50 students reported being comfortable using a computer. If I do not address this need, in class or out, my students will quickly feel frustrated by the complexity of computer and Internet assignments. The third lesson is that I must remain actively involved with my students' Internet activities even after it may seem that my involvement is no longer necessary. At least one reason for this is that without oversight and assistance, students frequently have difficulty locating sites that are within their comfort zone in terms of readability. An activity that sounds fun can quickly become an exercise in frustration if students feel that they cannot understand what they are reading. Below I outline some ways in which I try to apply these lessons in three very common Internet-based activities.

Writing to E-pals

I use an online source to locate another teacher whose class can correspond with mine. (One good source is www.e-pals.com.) In the beginning stages of correspondence, my students are more comfortable participating when they are assured that their letters are nearly error free. Thus, I ask students to e-mail their letters to me first. I print them

out and correct them on paper so that they can study the changes that I have made. Students input their changes and send their mail. Of course, the degree of correction that I provide varies with the proficiency level of the students. Although some students do not feel the need for their English to be checked, there is another reason to remain involved with their correspondence, at least in the beginning. That is to monitor messages for appropriate tone and style. This way, we can discuss issues of Internet etiquette, or netiquette, as they arise.

Surfing the Web

Students really enjoy surfing the web to find sites related to their hobbies or personal interests. For many students, this, in itself, is motivating. On the other hand, some students feel overwhelmed by the English that they encounter when they begin such a project. One way to provide support is to survey students first about their special interests and then to preview sites to help identify some with readable information or easy-to-navigate pages. After students develop some experience and confidence, they rely less on my help. Even when they become more independent, I want to remain involved with their web surfing. For example, I ask students to send me e-mail with a link to their favorite site and a few comments about why they like it. This exercise helps them practice appropriate e-mail style and writing skills. I post their websites on our class homepage and might add a comment of my own. Then, students visit the page, read what their classmates and I have said, and reflect on what they have posted, as well.

Creating Bulletin Boards and Home Pages

Typically, when my students are in the beginning stages of Internet use, I create a class homepage that the browser goes to by default. At first, I handle the upkeep of the site. I post links for students to explore, create a bulletin board where they can post comments, and use a page for class information and homework assignments. After students become comfortable using the computer and visiting the site, I can turn over more of the work to them. Sometimes they create their own sites or electronic magazines.

After several interesting or successful experiences with the Internet, students may become more intrinsically motivated to study English. They see that with the Internet the whole world is connected, and that with English, they can be connected, too. Also, with English, they have access to far more resources than they do without it. Thus, using the Internet shows them in a very concrete way the usefulness of acquiring English language skills. The Internet also provides students with many opportunities for authentic, communicative experiences in English. Students who are responding to e-

mail and posting opinions on discussion pages are intimately involved in creative and communicative uses of English. They are also likely to be exposed to lexically and syntactically more complex language on the Internet than in our language classes.

We have come full circle. The Internet can spark interest in English language learners. Then, with carefully designed activities, students build familiarity and confidence with both the computer and with English. Finally, they may see English in a more desirable light. The secret is integrating Internet activities with class work, providing assistance with technical skills, and remaining closely involved with their work.

About the Author

Wang Xin graduated from the College of Foreign Languages of Inner Mongolia Polytechnic University in 1993. Since then, he has taught English in the same institution.

