

BUT THEY'RE NOT MOTIVATED

by Esther A. Cup Choy

When teachers gather to discuss their profession, the deepest groans are always reserved for the problem of motivation. This is as true in TESOL classes as any other, but some aspects of the problem appear to be peculiar to foreign language classes. The magnitude of the problem may be seen in Leon Jakobovit's breakdown of factors important to success in foreign language learning. He suggests the following percentages: aptitude—33%; intelligence—20%; other factors—14%; perseverance or motivation—33%. (5). One third of a student's chance for success in learning a foreign language depends upon his motivation—as teachers have intuitively felt, motivation is a key factor.

One of the peculiarities of language learning which makes motivation a particularly difficult problem, is the fact that language is a personal matter. "It involves the personal activity of speaking or writing. This is an act of behavior in public and the same possibilities of shyness, self-consciousness and humiliation are present as they are in any appearance before an audience...the failure to use a personal skill in public leads not only to disappointment on the part of pupil and teacher alike, but, because it is so personal a matter, it may lead to a sense of humiliation and frustration."(4).

Earl Stevick, in discussing this problem, offers the term "lathophobic aphasia" which he defines as "an unwillingness to speak for fear of making a mistake." (1). We all certainly have seen this syndrome in our students and even in ourselves.

Another problem in foreign language motivation is related to feelings of alienation on the part of the learner. "So long as he (the student) is able to interact with people whose relationships and friendships he values, there is little incentive for learning the language of the new community." (1). Hence a student living within his own language community will have much less mo-

tivation to master a second language than one who is placed in a setting where his only means of communicating and relating to others depends upon his mastery of a new tongue.

In fact, students who do begin to master a second language encounter special problems as detailed by Lambert. "...the more proficient one becomes in a second language the more he may find his place in his original membership group is modified at the same time as the other linguistic-cultural group becomes something more than a reference group to him. It may, in fact, become a second membership group for him. Depending upon the compatibility of the two cultures, he may experience feelings of chagrin or regret as he loses ties in one group, mixed with a fearful anticipation of entering a relatively new group. The concept of 'anomie' first proposed by Duckheim...refers to the feelings of social uncertainty or dissatisfaction which sometimes characterize not only the bilingual but also the serious student of a second language." (9). As a result the learner may have real ambivalence about learning the new language. His relationships with those who speak it must make him want to identify with them and be willing to take on very subtle aspects of their behavior such as their language and even their style of speech. This is tantamount to asking a native of Boston and another from San Antonio to exchange their distinctive ways of speaking. We can easily see how this would create a threatening loss of identity to staunch natives of those two cities, and from this perhaps better understand the problem for some of our students.

On the other hand, Lambert cites studies which show that "... students with an integrative disposition to learn French had parents who are also integrative and sympathetic to the French community." The high motivation of these students to master a foreign language apparently "stems from a family-wide attitudinal disposition." (9).

Unfortunately, we have no control over family attitudes toward other cultures and languages, so what can a teacher do about student motivation? First, we should inquire what the student's concept of a good language teacher is. Girard's research indicates some students believe a good teacher is one who offers a good model, especially in the spoken language. He/she is a good technician of language teaching and a good psychologist who is aware of individual problems, capable of coping with them and of creating "an atmosphere of mutual confidence and sympathy in the teacher-class relationship." (5).

In creating this atmosphere conducive to learning, a teacher's main concerns are need to gain the students' attention and maintain and direct their interest. Mugglestone feels that social needs for acceptance and dominance and achievement or academic needs are secondary motivators for students. The primary motivator, the one most available to be aroused, is curiosity. It is innate and universal although in different degrees. According to Mugglestone, curiosity finds expression in three ways. 1) There is a need for environmental conditions that afford variety, illustrated by studies of sensory deprivation. 2) There is a need for physical activity, as shown by the success of learning by doing. 3) There is a need to be mentally alert, demonstrated by the studies of cognitive psychologists. (10). The implications of these three needs are worthy of investigation.

A wealth of physical resources are available to the language classroom. A teacher must be careful not to overwhelm or confuse students with too much novelty, and conversely, not bore students with overuse of one aid. Materials must be culturally authentic in order to be of value. The problem of organization deals with both the materials and the people in the classroom. Selection and sequencing of materials must be done carefully, utilizing meaningful examples and realistic situations, remembering always that today's learning provides the base for future learning. Organization of students implies flexibility of grouping: cooperative groups; competing groups; co-acting groups working independently of each other on the same assignment; large groups; committees; dyads. The available combinations are many, and

should be varied in such a way as to provide for successful learning situations for the maximum number of students. The key to organizational success is to make achievement possible for all students.

Provision of feedback is another factor of classroom organization and in this it is particularly important to be aware of cultural differences which might lead to misinterpretation. Gestures, facial expressions, and tone of voice may all mean different things to different cultures, so a teacher needs to be aware of student responses to them. He/she also needs to investigate whether conventional marks and grades are good motivators for the class of students under consideration.

In considering language learning activities, the teacher needs to remember that distributed or spaced practice is less boring and more reinforcing for drill work. A high tolerance of errors in spontaneous communication will encourage further communication. It is possible for the teacher to offer good models without pouncing on every error a hesitant student may make. A. Guy Hill says in his discussion of conversational language classes, "What is said is not particularly important, 'making a loud noise in English' is important." (6). According to Hill, a conversation class is not a class in which anything new is taught except perhaps incidentally. Its prime aims are practice and self confidence.

Mugglestone suggests working from role playing and with stimulating problems in conversation classes. For example, ask the student to "imagine that you are walking down a dark street at 2 a.m. with a suitcase filled with jewelry and a gun. A policeman stops you, asks you to unlock the case and looks inside it. He asks you what's going on. What would you say?"

"Heads—it's dynamism, tails—it's insensitivity" is Doug Case's warning to teachers not to get so involved in their lesson plans. They may confuse pace with speed and leave their students behind them, panting and confused. They may rush to jump on student mistakes, thus stifling expression. They may push for student participation until it becomes pointless repetition. Such overvaluing of technique leads to acquiring teaching skills while disregarding student needs.

A possible antidote to this problem is suggested by Antier who recommends pre-testing students and asking them to help set objectives for the semester or year. (2).

A foreign language in its entirety may be overwhelming, but setting short-range as well as long-range goals reduces it to a digestible package.

Cultures which define the student role as that of listener, and the teacher's as that of authority, may inhibit conversational exchanges in the classroom. Guy Hill suggests reorganizing classroom seating in order to help overcome this. By seating the teacher within a circle of students, the pattern may be broken sufficiently to make it easier for students to speak out. He also suggests brief fluency drills before free conversation in order to loosen student tongues as well as help form good speech habits through practice of correct patterns. By changing the expectations of the students through more democratic seating and using warming-up exercises we may be able to break through to greater motivation to participate. He also urges choosing subjects students could talk about easily in their own language and allowing them some preparation time to think about the topic by announcing it several days ahead of the actual discussion time. (6).

In discussing the difficulties of teaching reading to both students with foreign language backgrounds and those with non-standard English backgrounds, John B. King states: "The whole process of wholesome personality development and of thinking, as an individual and as a member of a group, is nothing more than communication within one's self and with others. I view reading as the culmination, the outcome, the end-product of this dual process of communication—the individual with himself and the individual with others . . ." "We've failed . . . because they hear one language and we teach them to read another." (8). King urges that students be taught listening, speaking, thinking and writing skills as a basis for reading success. He believes that "the reading act is a simulated conversation between the writer, who is the absent speaker, and the reader, who is listening with his eyes." "To try to teach a child to

read a third language which he neither understands nor speaks is wasteful of the best efforts of, and inevitably harmful to, both the learner and the teacher." (8). This may explain the frustration of many of our students who speak and think in non-standard English but are expected to read in standard English.

How can there be motivation if the student is frustrated, overwhelmed, unsuccessful or receiving misunderstood feedback? How can a student be expected to be excited about learning, if the teacher is more interested in the material, the techniques or the lesson plan than in the student? As Antier says, "a person who cannot learn, cannot teach" (2) and the first learning a teacher must do is about himself/herself. Granted that students bring varying degrees of curiosity into a classroom and that they do not all share to an equal degree a receptive attitude toward learning a second language, still, as Girard says, the "teacher has influence to the extent to which he is responsive to all factors involved." (5). There will always be many good rationalizations for lack of student motivation, but the one area we have fully under our control as teachers is ourselves. We need to be willing to analyze what we are doing and how we are doing it in the classroom. We need to really know our students. Then, most importantly, we must be willing to change ourselves if our students are not succeeding.

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