

Motivating University Students in an English Speaking Class

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Abstract

Motivating English language learners, especially lower proficiency level university students, to speak only English in the classroom is a difficult feat. This semester-long project set in a university business English speaking class strove to do just that — to promote and create an English only environment that allowed the learners to interact comfortably with each other in their second language. First, key issues and considerations in motivation and how they were applied to the course are addressed. Then the students in the study are introduced. After that, the focus shifts to the course developed for the study. Finally, the results of the study are discussed.

Motivation in Language Classrooms

The study discussed in this paper revolved around motivating students to perform an assessment task, a mock tourism trade fair, at the end of a business English speaking course using English only. There are many factors that need to be examined while attempting to promote and maintain the kind of motivation needed for low proficiency learners to perform tasks using only their second language.

First, basic motivational conditions were considered. Dornyei (2001) states this can be done by creating a pleasant and supportive classroom environment with appropriate teacher behaviour. Teachers should show enthusiasm for the tasks and activities, develop a good relationship with the students, and give students individual support when asked for and needed. They should also encourage risk-taking and acceptance of mistakes as a normal occurrence by ensuring that mistakes will not be met by ridicule nor cause embarrassment. For the course in this study, these conditions were considered and provided. As will be discussed in greater detail later in the paper, the fifty students involved in this study were divided according to proficiency levels between eight teachers who all taught the students at the same time in different classrooms. Because of the small number of students in each of the eight classes, it was very easy for the teachers to develop a good relationship with the students. Also, ample opportunities were provided throughout the semester to combine classes and team teach, therefore allowing teachers to develop good

relationships with other students. Furthermore, although the ultimate goal of the course was to have the students speak in English only during the assessment, Japanese, the first language of the students, was allowed in the lessons preceding the assessment. This helped relax the students and let them try out different ideas first in their more comfortable first language, then in English with full support from the teacher.

Second, Dornyei (2001) states that initial motivation needs to be generated. One way to do this is by increasing the learners' expectancy of success by providing ample preparation and assistance. This was done by designing the course in a step by step manner that gradually built the skills that would be needed for the final assessment. Each new lesson in the course gave the students the opportunity to learn new skills and repeatedly practice them so they would be ready during the assessment. Another way is by increasing the learners' goal-orientedness. By introducing the trade fair that would act as the final assessment with a teacher demonstration in the first lesson, the students were provided with a clear idea of what would be expected of them during the assessment.

The third motivational factor Dornyei (2001) recommends is to maintain and protect the motivation of the learners. One way this was done in this course was to make learning stimulating and enjoyable by providing novel and interesting tasks that challenged the students. Maintaining and protecting motivation can also be done by selecting specific learner goals. All the tasks in the lessons preceding the assessment and the assessment itself contained clearly defined and challenging yet achievable goals. Finally, promoting cooperation amongst the learners can help maintain motivation. From the beginning of the course, the students were divided into groups of two to four. The students remained in these same groups for the rest of the semester, working together to achieve all tasks and goals set before them as a team.

By exploring and incorporating these motivating factors into the course, excellent ground-work was laid down from the very beginning. These factors would help play a big part in the outcome of the program.

The Students

The fifty students involved in this course and study were first, second, and third year university students, both male and female, who were between eighteen and twenty years old. The students had all received the standard amount of English most Japanese students receive — three years in junior high school and three years in high school — and had elementary to intermediate English proficiency levels.

The students were majoring in economics. They were part of an intensive business English program and met with the same native English speaking instructor (one of eight instructors who

all taught at the same time) four times a week over two fourteen-week semesters. The lessons were all ninety minutes each. The four courses throughout the week each had a different focus. Two of the days were textbook days; one general English textbook and one business English textbook. The other two days focused on TOEIC and practical business skills, respectively. This paper will take a closer look at the semester-long speaking course developed for the practical business skills speaking class held during the second semester of the school year.

The Practical Business English Speaking Course

Goals and Objectives

During the practical business English skills class, an emphasis was put on developing the spoken English skills of the students, although the other three skills of listening, reading and writing were also incorporated into the program to allow for a more balanced approach to language acquisition (Nation & Newton, 2009). The ultimate goal of this course was for the students to participate in a mock Tourism Trade Fair over two days near the end of the semester, using English only. This trade fair acted as the final assessment for the practical business English skills portion of the intensive course.

All of the preceding lessons consisted of building the skills necessary to participate in the trade fair at the end of the semester. Therefore, the following speaking objectives were aimed for during the course:

- 1 . Students will be able to (SWBAT) create an imaginary company and its history.
- 2 . SWBAT participate in the mock trade fair from two perspectives — as a company booth operator and as a guest (journalist, job hunter, or customer) at the trade fair.
- 3 . SWBAT ask and answer questions about companies.
- 4 . SWBAT explain their company and its services.
- 5 . SWBAT participate in a job interview from both perspectives.
- 6 . SWBAT negotiate a fair price for their favourite package tour.

The Course

The course consisted of ninety-minute lessons held once a week over twelve weeks. The first and last lessons of the fourteen-week schedule were set aside for orientation and exams respectively. Each of the twelve lessons in the speaking course focused on specific tasks that helped the students gain skills that would help them with the final goal — a mock trade fair with a tourism theme, held at the end of the semester over two days. The Trade Fair necessitated that each student learn two different roles, one role for each day of the fair. On the first day of the trade fair, half the class took on the role of company booth operators. The remaining students were

trade fair guests, which in turn had three role options: journalist, job seeker, or client. On the second day of the trade fair, the roles were reversed, therefore allowing each student the opportunity to perform both role types.

The twelve lesson plan for the Tourism Trade Fair project was as follows:

- 1 . Teacher demonstration; Travel brochure analysis and brainstorming
- 2 . Culture and customs worksheets
- 3 . Create a tourism company and main service (for booth operator roles)
- 4 . Email writing and article writing (for client and journalist roles)
- 5 . CV analysis, assessment, and writing (for job seeker and booth operator roles)
- 6 . Job interviews and cover letter writing (for job seeker and booth operator roles)
- 7 . Practice questions and answers about the company and services (for all roles)
- 8 . Basic negotiation skills (for booth operators and clients)
- 9 . Advertisement poster and flyer preparation (for booth operator roles)
10. Trade Fair Day 1 (for all roles)
11. Trade Fair Day 2 (for all roles)
12. Follow-up tasks (for all roles)

Lessons One and Two consisted of pre-task activities to introduce the topic and topic-related vocabulary needed for the remainder of the course. These took the form of a teacher demonstration of the trade fair from all eight teachers, travel brochure analysis and brainstorming to give the students ideas for creating their own imaginary tourism companies, and culture and customs worksheets to broaden their vocabulary and generate ideas.

Lesson Three gave the students a chance to start creating their tourism company and main services. In Lesson One, the students were placed into groups of two to four (depending on the amount of students available — ideally each day of the Trade Fair should have a minimum of six booths). In this lesson, the students started to apply some of the ideas they had come up with during the pre-task activities through discussion and by filling out forms.

Lessons Four and Five focused on email, CV/cover letter, and article writing. Using task-based worksheets, these lessons focused on skills the students would need to perform the guest roles and follow-up tasks. Although primarily writing lessons, various discussions, and analyses were performed by the students.

Lesson Six focused on job interview skills from the perspectives of both the interviewer and interviewee. Different basic interview questions were brainstormed then practiced using various activities.

Lesson Seven involved practicing asking and answering questions through information exchange. These questions and answers were needed for the trade fair, and had been discussed

previously during the pre-task lessons. By recycling the language used during those lessons, the students had a better chance of acquiring set words and phrases.

Lesson Eight provided the students with a chance to practice basic negotiation skills. This was especially useful for both the booth operator and client roles.

Lesson Nine was spent preparing posters and flyers for the booths. The posters helped create an authentic looking environment. The flyers helped the students performing the guest roles with their information gathering which would allow them to complete their follow-up tasks after the trade fair.

Lessons Ten and Eleven were the Tourism Trade Fair assessment days. “English only” was stressed throughout the entire two-day event with signs and verbal reminders from the teachers at the beginning of the sessions. The students finally got the chance to use all the language and skills they had been developing since the beginning of the semester. The students were asked to wear business suits to help immerse them in the experience and add to the authenticity of the activity. During the trade fair, the booth operators were encouraged to provide information to the guests about their own companies. The journalists gathered information about the whole trade fair or specific companies. The job seekers participated in job interviews. The clients gathered information about the services offered by the companies and were encouraged to negotiate for better deals.

Lesson Twelve was the final lesson of the speaking course. Here the students performed their respective follow-up tasks using the information they had gathered during the trade fair. Journalists wrote an article about the Trade Fair, focusing on their favourite companies. Job seekers wrote a cover letter to apply for their top choices. Clients wrote emails to friends detailing their favourite companies and why they chose that package tour. Then a group discussion of the event was held to gather insight into their individual experiences.

The Principles

Besides the motivational considerations discussed earlier, this speaking course also had a series of guiding principles. They reflected the goals and objectives of the course, and various second language acquisition theories from many researchers. These principles are as follows:

- 1 . *Provide a large amount of comprehensible input* (Krashen, 1982; Nation & Newton, 2009).

By flooding the learners with many opportunities to listen to business-related words and phrases they might hear during the trade fair, the students trained their ears to listen for these familiar lexical components, therefore eliminating the necessity to dwell too long on trying to figure out what was being said. The speed this familiarity with high frequency business terms allowed helped the students respond more quickly and appropriately during

the course's final assessment.

- 2 . *Provide opportunities for pushed output* (Swain, 1985). Students need to be pushed to produce accurate, coherent, and appropriate utterances in order to notice the gaps and holes between their interlanguage and the target language. During this course, this was done by having the students perform the tasks in as much English as possible and in English only during the final assessment.
- 3 . *Provide a large variety of authentic material and text* (Nation & Newton, 2009; Rost, 2011). From CVs to emails to teacher demonstrations of the event, the students were given many different texts in order to gain more opportunities to encounter the same words in different contexts, therefore gaining a more well-rounded understanding of the vocabulary. The texts were also as authentic as possible, not only for the immediate needs of the learners in the trade fair, but for the real world as well.
- 4 . *Create intrinsic motivation through autonomy* (Brown, 2007; Rost, 2011). During the course, the students were given the opportunity to choose the kind of tourism company they wanted to create and “run” at the mock trade fair. By giving the students this kind of choice, many researchers such as Brown (2007), Dornyei (2001), and Rost (2011) believe this will allow a chance for the students to develop intrinsic motivation because they are focusing on something that matters to them personally.
- 5 . *Use pre-tasks to set students up for success* (Beglar & Hunt, 2002; Willis, 1996). Pre-tasks introduced the topic and vocabulary needed for the task, which gave the students a better chance at succeeding in accomplishing the outcome. The students will feel more confident during the task if they have an idea of what they are listening for or trying to produce.
- 6 . *Provide clear task goals* (Brown, 2007, Dornyei, 2001). All tasks should have very clearly established goals so the students know what they are doing and why they are doing it. This gives the students more confidence in completing the task and more confidence that what they are doing is useful during the trade fair and hopefully in real life business situations.
- 7 . *Provide multiple passes at the same text* (Brown, 2007; Nation & Newton, 2009). This goes hand-in-hand with principle number one. Allowing the students to listen to the same passage, set of questions, or dialogues many times helps them become more accustomed to the sounds of spoken English. It also lets them understand exactly what they are having trouble with therefore, allowing them to notice similar potential problems in the future.
- 8 . *Provide corrective feedback* (Brown, 2007; Lyster & Ranta, 1997; Swain, 1985). By testing their language hypotheses and receiving corrective feedback, learners can make the necessary adjustments to their interlanguage. During this course, the teachers worked closely with the students and monitored their output, providing constant support and

feedback to help the students form the utterances needed to complete the tasks.

9. *Give chances to develop complexity, accuracy and fluency through practice and varied repetition* (Brown, 2007; Ellis, 2009; Mackey, 2007; Muranoi, 2007; Nation & Newton, 2009; Skehan, 2009). Many researchers stress that one of the keys to acquiring language is through lots of repetition. Language should be thought of as a skill, and skills need to be acquired. Just like a pianist learning a song for the first time, language should also be practiced over and over again until it is perfect. Unfortunately learning a language through rote repetition does not hold the same appeal as learning to play a musical instrument, so it is the teacher's job to present the students with numerous opportunities to encounter and practice the same language multiple times in a variety of ways. This course was designed to teach new spoken language in a variety of ways which allowed the students to encounter the same language many times. Take for example the information about the companies the students created. During one of the first lessons, the students sat with their groups and brainstormed ideas to help form their imaginary companies. The teacher provided corrective feedback at this point to make sure the sentences behind the ideas were correct. Then, in the lessons that followed, the students used these new sentences during question and answer exercises, during poster and flyer preparation, during activities when they were thinking about their trade fair guest roles, etc. Variety keeps the language interesting and boosts the motivation of the students. Repetition helps the students acquire the language and improve their complexity, accuracy and fluency.
10. *Teach lexical chunks* (Ellis, 2008; Nation, 2009; Richards & Rodgers, 2001). Learners can retrieve words more easily from their memory if they are automatized in lexical chunks. This can be done by allowing for multiple opportunities to practice the chunks so they are embedded in the learner's long term memory.
11. *The final assessment should match the tasks throughout the course* (Egyud & Glover, 2001). It is unfair to teach the students using many speaking tasks, and then test them with a written exam at the end of the course. This course was designed so that the tasks learned during the course could be used during the final assessment which was the mock trade fair.

By following the principles laid out for this speaking course, the students had a better chance of achieving the course goals and objectives, and being able to speak only in English during the assessment.

Results

The results of this study are purely qualitative in nature. They were gathered through observation and interviews of both the students and other teachers involved in the program.

All students, from the highest proficiency level to the lowest, spoke 100% English during the three trade fairs that the researcher attended. Some students said this was because they had received ample preparation for the event during the lessons leading up to the trade fair. Some also gave credit to the atmosphere that had been created in the room. The decorated booths and business suits added to the authenticity of the event, therefore encouraging the participants to speak in English only. Incidentally, all students who did not wear suits to the first day came fully suited up for day two of the trade fair. Finally, many students said they had spoken in English only because it had seemed like the most natural thing to do since everyone else was speaking English.

Most students who were interviewed after the trade fair claimed to have enjoyed the experience. However, the biggest complaint at the end of Lessons Ten and Eleven was of being tired, but this was usually said with smiles.

There was a visible increase in motivation during the trade fair. Most interviewed students gave credit for this to a sense of accomplishment in having completed their tasks successfully.

Conclusion

Although many factors affect the motivation of a language learner, certain key items can help promote motivation in a positive way. This study found that if learners are provided with an authentic environment that is interesting, relaxed, and safe for them to try their new English skills, the students will be more willing to perform the task using only their second language.

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