MOTIVATIONAL STRATEGIES FOR LEARNING A FOREIGN LANGUAGE IN THE CLASSROOM

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Summary

The purpose of the present article is to analyse the strategies and models of motivating the learning of a foreign language. An increasing number of scholars combine psycholinguistic and linguistic approaches, various motivational models and theories in order to make sure the complex nature of motivation is better understood. The concept that we shall focus on in this article is self-motivation that, according to Alan McLean, comes from Self via four internal motivation drivers:engagement, stimulation, structure and feedback,and plays a vital role in academic learning. We have adopted this concept in our study on the motivation for learning a foreign language due to the intricate character of the foreign language acquisition process. This paper will suggest some tips for practitioners on how to maintain, protect and encourage self-motivation for learning a foreign language.

Rezumat

Scopul pe care ni l-am propus în inițierea și realizarea acestui studiu teoretico-experimental a fost determinarea strategiilor de motivare a învățării limbii străine de către elevii de gimnaziu și de a prezenta modele de comportament didactic motivant. Problema dezvoltării motivației pentru învățarea limbilor străine este intens dezbătută în psihologia și psiholingvistica învățării limbilor străine și drept consecință cultura psihologică dispune azi de un formidabil bagaj de idei și tehnici de stimulare a motivației învățării. Principalul rezultat al studiului întreprins constă în teza potrivit căreia tipul de motivație școlară cel mai productiv și cel mai stimulator este automotivarea, care conform studiului, joacă un rol vital în învățarea unei limbi străine. În articol sunt descrise strategiile de dezvoltare a automotivării pentru învățarea unei limbi străine și de consolidare a achizițiilor obținute în acest proces.

Cuvinte cheie: învățare, strategii de motivare, motivație școlară, automotivație.

Introduction

Motivation is an overworked term, an umbrella term for answering all questions concerning the whys of our behaviour and thinking. It "is related to one of the most basic aspects of the human mind, and most teachers and researchers would agree that it has a very important role in determining success or failure in any learning situation." (Dörnyei, 2001, p.2). Z.Dörnyei's experience is that 99 per cent of language learners who really want to learn a foreign language will be able to master a reasonable working knowledge of it as a minimum, regardless of their language aptitude. "Without sufficient motivation, however, even the brightest learners are unlikely to persist long enough to attain any really useful language."(Dörnyei, 2001, p.5).

We would say motivation is the energy that fuels the language learning process. And "due to the complex nature of language itself (which is at the same time a communication code, an integral part of the individual's identity and the most important channel of social organization)", [5, p.425] skills to motivate learners are crucial for language teachers.

The question is: what kind of motivation are we expected to cultivate?

Normally, students start learning a foreign language possessing sufficient motivation to succeed in this activity, as mastering a foreign language seems to be appealing and, as psychologists often say, little children are motivationally `innocent' and `uncorrupted' because they seem to possess a natural curiosity about the world and an inherent desire to learn. This is, in fact, often cited as a proof that motivation to learn, just like the ability to acquire language, is an innate characteristic of the human species. Therefore, in an ideal world where the learners' curiosity and inherent motivation has not as yet been curbed or diminished by a student-unfriendly school system, all learners are eager to learn and the learning experience is a constant source of intrinsic pleasure for them. However, "we need to adopt a more down-to-earth perspective. For most teachers the real motivational issue is to find ways to encourage their students to accept the goals of the given classroom activities, regardless of whether or not the students enjoy these activities or would choose to engage in them if other alternatives were available." (Dörnyei, 2001, p.50-51).

Furthermore, even though fluent English is considered to be the modern student's passport nowadays, as lots of Moldovan undergraduates continue their studies abroad where mastering English is essential, a great number of them (and we refer to preadolescents) lose their motivation gradually, especially when it comes to realize that more and more efforts are to be invested in the learning process. This is the fact that challenged a PhD experiment on psychological conditions underlying the formation of motivation for learning a foreign language in secondary school.

As researchers we were amazed to discover that "there isn't a child who isn't motivated in any school environment, they are all motivated: some of them are just motivated to wind you up, or impress the peer group, or avoid work. The brain is always motivated, the brain is always looking to adapt to its environment so that it could respond appropriately, that is with a certain type of behaviour to a certain situation. So, what teachers normally call discipline problems are just the iceberg in this context and it is a real challenge for teachers to discover the underlying motives or the personality that is organising these motives**."**(McLean, 2014a).

The motivated learning of a foreign language

What are the motives and what is the best type of motivation, the most productive one in a learning context, the one that a teacher should be able to generate and guide in their students' development?

The answers we were seeking for were found in A McLean's and Z. Dörnyei's works, two prominent psychologists of our age. Alan McLean is a Scottish educational psychologist, the

author of the "Motivated School", who was until April 2011 a Principal Psychologist in Glasgow. He was commissioned to produce a training programme on motivation by the Scottish government in 2005. The Motivated School programme has recently been introduced into LEAs in England, including Buckinghamshire, Hampshire and Bristol as well as the Isle of Man. Zoltán Dörnyei is a Professor of Psycholinguistics at the University of Nottingham in the United Kingdom, renowned for his work on motivation in second language learning. They reckon the best motivation is self-motivation which is the kind of motivation that is fuelled from the inside, that is self-determined and is able to produce persistence and the capability of overcoming various distractors or intellectual obstacles.

As teachers, we learnt that children's motivation could be divided into two categories: *pre-ten* and *post-ten* motivation. As researchers, we have understood that these two categories depend on the factors that impact students' motivation and the latter would be mostly influenced by the peer group (this idea is based on A. McLean's theory). Intuitively, we always felt our role as teachers was significant, yet it was frightening to realize that it is actually vital. This idea is perfectly illustrated by Dr. Haim G. Ginott in *Teacher and Child*: "I have come to a frightening conclusion. I am the decisive element in the classroom. It is my personal approach that creates the climate. It is my daily mood that makes the weather. As a teacher I possess tremendous power to make a child's life miserable or joyous. I can be a tool of torture or an instrument of inspiration. I can humiliate or humour, hurt or heal. In all situations, it is my response that decides whether a crisis will be escalated or de-escalated, and a child humanized or de-humanized."(Ginott, 1972).

In other words, as Alan McLean says, we are never neutral, we are either draining our students or energizing them. It is all about either bringing happiness whenever we enter or whenever we leave the classroom.

Research Study: Theoretical and Practical findings

Our study addresses the psychological conditions underlying the development of motivation for learning a foreign language. The main goal of our research resides in determining, elaborating and implementing a set of psychological conditions underlying the development of motivation for learning a foreign language in a learning environment at the preadolescent age. The following hypotheses have been strengthened during the research:

1. Formation of self-motivation for learning a foreign language is based on the development of self-beliefs (self-efficacy), accompanied by a sense of autonomy and belonging

2. Self-motivation for learning a foreign language is developed by influencing the self-efficacy beliefs.

3. Development of self-motivation enhances the efficiency of learning a foreign language.

Our work is based on the recent advances in research on motivation as a phenomenon studied by Psychology of Personality, Educational Psychology and Psychology of learning a foreign language and it is going to be extended in so far as to become a practical tool for any language teacher seeking a way to motivate their students.

The study that we have carried out up to now is based on A. McLean's Motivated Learning Theory, C. Dweck's Mindsets, *Gardner's Socio-Educational Model* of Second-Language Acquisitionand Z. Dörnyei's L2 Motivational Self-System. These theories were successfully employed in a language learning environment offered by Orizont Lyceum in 2007-2008.

The experiment comprised 60 students from three 7th grades and included 25 training sessions and 40 English lessons led in accordance with the above models.

The research has revealed the following preliminary conclusions:

1. Moldovan children's motivation for learning English declines steadily from the 5th to the 7th grades.

2. Preadolescents motivation is mostly influenced by the peer group attitudes.

3. Teachers trigger the required motivation at this age by creating the appropriate type of classroom atmosphere.

4. Optimal motivation for learning English is self-motivation.

5. Self-motivation for learning English at the preadolescent age is built on the development of students' self-beliefs (self-efficacy), accompanied by a sense of autonomy and belonging.

6. Self-efficacy beliefs are based on the interactions of three mindsets: ideas about ability, interpretations of progress and achievement attitudes.

7. Students' self-efficacy beliefs can be influenced by four drivers mastered by teachers: stimulation, structure, feedback, engagement.

8. The four drivers can be activated by means of a set of strategies that mostly suit preadolescents.

So, the key to motivation is needs – people's or in our situation, children's needs, their self-emotions, or "how they feel about themselves as learners, what is on their mind"(**McLean, 2014b).** According to A. McLean, children have got three main needs; A. McLean calls them the three 'A' needs:

1.Affiliation, which is a sense of belonging, a sense of being valued, connected, and the opposite of that is alienation. Affiliation is a fundamental need that in A. McLean's view, underpins everything.

2.Agency, which is a sense of confidence and self-belief, a sense of competence, a sense of self-efficacy, a sense of control: "I know how to do this job, I know how to read, I know how to do geography well." The opposite of Agency is apathy.

3.Autonomy, which is a sense of being self-determining and trusted which, according to A. McLean, is the centrepiece of them all - the most complex one, the gold dust: "How much scope or trust do I have? How much scope do I have for self-determination in my classroom?"The more self-determination, the more autonomy we have, the more motivated we will be. The opposite of Autonomy is anxiety, where we are overwhelmed, pressurised or discouraged(**McLean,** 2014c).

And so what a teacher needs to do is create a classroom climate that helps children meet their needs or, in other words, provide the conditions required for driving students' self-motivation. In 2003 A.McLean identified four internal motivation drivers or mindsets that by being influenced positively could generate self-motivation. They are: ideas about ability; attributions or interpretations of progress; achievement attitudes and self-efficacy beliefs**(McLean, 2003,** p.31-55). In his recent work "Motivating every learner", 2009, the author refers to them as self-beliefs or Agency. In other words, they are those internal triggers that by, being accompanied by Affiliation and Autonomy generate self-motivation. The researcher has based his finding on the two types of mindsets discovered by Carol Dweck, a professor of psychology at Stanford University that has been conducting research on motivation and personality for over twenty years. She has introduced the concept of growth and fixed mindsets, which could be perceived as a cornerstone in A. McLean's theory.

According to her theory people can be divided into two categories that represent two basic mindsets: in a fixed mindset people think their intelligence is fixed, while in a growth mindset they believe their basic abilities can be developed through effort. Thus a fixed mindset is followed by ability interpretations of success and failure, performance attitudes to achievement or, the so-called self-promotion attitudes (Dweck and Leggett, 1988; Dweck 1996; McLean, 2003) [6, p.256-273] and, very often, by low self-efficacy beliefs, while a growth mindset causes effort interpretations of success and failure, mastery attitudes to achievement or, the so-called self-improvement attitudes (Dweck, 1996; McLean, 2003) and consequently, very often, high self-efficacy beliefs.

In her research, C.Dweck has "been amazed over and over again, at how quickly students of all ages pick up on messages about themselves – at how sensitive they are to suggestions about their personal qualities or about the meaning of their actions and experiences. The kinds of

praise (and criticism) students receive from their teachers and parents tell them how to think about what they do – and what they are."(Dweck, p.4). In other words, teachers possess all the required tools to help children adopt positive self-beliefs.

A. McLean distinguishes four classroom energisers/instruments that teachers can employ in this respect: engagement, stimulation, structure and feedback.

1. ENGAGEMENT, which is giving children a sense of belonging.

Teacher's input: SHOWing YOU CARE – Valuing

Student's output: A Sense of Belonging

This driver shapes the quality of the relationships between the teachers and students as well as between peers; it is about how teachers show they are interested in children and what climate they manage to create in their lessons.

2. FEEDBACK, which gives children information about how well they are doing.

Teacher's input: SHOWing YOU BELIEVE - Informing

Student's output: Self-Efficacy Beliefs

Motivating feedback involves praising effort and strategy use, making students feel responsible for success and linking failure to factors students can repair.

3. STIMULATION, which relates to the quality of teaching and learning in the classroom and refers to the intrinsic aspects of the curriculum.

Teacher's input: SHOWing YOU LOVE TEACHING THEM - Enthusing

Student's output: A Sense of Purpose

Relevance, challenge, control, curiosity and fantasy are some of the key intrinsic motivators.

4. STRUCTURE, which is a sense of clarity towards goals.

Teacher's input: SHOWing YOU TRUST - Empowering

Student's output: Self-Determination

This driver determines the amount of explicit information that is made available in the classroom.

The required level of structure is reached by clearly setting boundaries, communicating goals and

responding consistently. It is the key issues with autonomy support**(McLean, 2003,** p.14).

We managed to apply A. McLean's theory in our classroom which was possible by means of a group of methods and techniques meant to generate and maintain ours students' motivation or the so-called `motivational strategies` suggested by Z.Dörnyei for the language classroom. In his work Z. Dörnyei defines the strategies as being motivational

influences that are consciously exerted to achieve some systematic and enduring positive effect (Dörnyei, 2001). Our approach in organizing them focuses on the 4 drivers and the 3 'A' needs described by A. McLean in the Motivated school. We find them extremely useful for any teacher interested in driving their students' self-motivation. The classification that we have adopted results in a *Motivational Toolkit for Language teachers*(q.v.Appendix).

Conclusion

To summarize, we would quote A.McLean on the role of teachers today: „The teacher really has to become a social engineer, or someone who is really spending a lot of his time not just thinking about the curriculum or teaching and learning, but thinking about the classroom climate; that's why the classroom climate is so important. Not only does it set the scene for the transmission of the curriculum and the transmission of the teacher's values, but it is creating a climate for the peer group to operate in, and the peer group is a fundamental component in this whole motivation game.What is interesting, as well, is the motivating teacher who has the capacity to do that feels good about themselves as teachers, because it is the same thing; it is a circle of motivation, without being too complicated"(**McLean,** 2014b).

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Appendix:Motivational Toolkit for Language teachers *(Sample)*

A.*Through ENGAGEMENT or Valuing (teacher's input)*

to AFFILIATION or Sense of Belonging (students' output)

Teacher: I CARE Student: I BELONG

- Include a specific `group rules' activity at the beginning of a group's life to establish the norms explicitly.

- Try and promote interaction, cooperation and the sharing of genuine personal information among the learners.

- Establish a norm of tolerance.

- Show students that you accept and care about them.

- Pay attention and listen to each of them.

B. Through FEEDBACK or *Informing* (teacher's input)

to AGENCY or *Self-Efficacy Beliefs* (students' output)

Teacher: I BELIEVE in YOU ⟶ Student: I CAN DO this

- Indicate to your students that you believe in their effort to learn and their capability to complete the tasks.

- Avoid social comparison, even in its subtle forms.

- Help learners accept the fact that they will make mistakes as part of the learning process.

• Encourage learners to explain their failures by the lack of effort and appropriate strategies applied rather than by their insufficient ability.

• Refuse to accept ability attributions and emphasise that the curriculum is within the learners' ability range.

C. Through STIMULATION or *Enthusing* (teacher's input)

to AUTONOMY or *Sense of Purpose*(students' output)

Teacher: I LOVE TEACHING YOU ⟶ *Student: I am DETERMINED*

• Make tasks challenging.

• Make task content attractive by adapting it to the students' natural interests or by including novel, intriguing, exotic, humorous, competitive or fantasy elements.

• Vary the learning tasks and other aspects of your teaching as much as you can.

• Relate the subject matter to the everyday experiences and backgrounds of the students.

• Highlight and demonstrate aspects of L2 learning that your students are likely to enjoy.

D. Through STRUCTURE or *Empowering* (teacher's input)

to AUTONOMY or *Self-Determination* (students' output)

Teacher: I TRUST YOU ⟶ Student: I am TRUSTWORTHY

• Teach students communication strategies to help them overcome communication difficulties.

• Provide appropriate strategies to carry out the task.

• Explain the purpose and utility of a task.

• Make sure that they receive sufficient preparation and assistance.

• Make sure they know exactly what success in the task involves.

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