Motivational Strategies in the Language Classroom

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Introduction: What this book is about and how it can be used

> 'Motivation is, without question, the most complex and challenging issue facing teachers today.'
> (Scheidecker and Freeman 1999:116)

Long arguments can be put forward to prove that motivation is one of the key issues in language learning and that skills to motivate learners are crucial for language teachers, but you would not be reading this book if you were not aware of this. So, instead of doing the compulsory 'rounds' of highlighting the significance of motivation for teachers/students/researchers/educational policy-makers and practically everybody else, let me start this book by taking a very different approach.

Is there such a thing as 'motivation'?

Strictly speaking, *there is no such thing as 'motivation'*. Of course such a statement cannot stay in the introduction of a book on motivation without immediate qualification. What I mean is that 'motivation' is an abstract, hypothetical concept that we use to explain why people think and behave as they do. It is obvious that in this sense the term subsumes a whole range of motives – from financial incentives such as a raise in salary to idealistic beliefs such as the desire for freedom – that have very little in common except that they all influence behaviour. Thus, 'motivation' is best seen as a broad umbrella term that covers a variety of meanings.

Why do we use 'motivation' if its meaning is so vague? My guess is simply because it is a very convenient way of referring to what is a rather complex issue. For example, when we say that a certain student is 'motivated', most teachers and parents can well imagine what we mean – a keen, committed and enthusiastic learner who has good reasons for learning, who studies with vigour and intensity, and who demonstrates perseverance – yet it would be rather cumbersome to be

more specific and list all these attributes. Similarly, we will have no problem envisaging an 'unmotivated' learner, even though, again, it might be quite tricky to describe exactly what this 'unmotivation' consists of.

The term is just as useful for theoreticians and researchers as for practitioners because it highlights one basic aspect of the human mind. This aspect is related to what one *wants/desires* (i.e. 'conative' functions), in contrast to characteristics related to what one *rationally thinks* (i.e. 'cognitive' functions) or *feels* (i.e. 'affective' functions). As Snow, Corno and Jackson (1996) summarise in the *Handbook of Educational Psychology*, this triadic distinction of the human mind (according to conation, cognition and affect) has been around for hundreds of years, and it is certainly a useful division when we consider specific learners: Aren't a student's 'keenness', 'cleverness' and 'temperament' obvious features to consider when we start describing someone in our class (e.g. *Rupert is a sensitive and bright student who is genuinely interested in history . . .*)?

To summarise, 'motivation' 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. My personal experience is that 99 per cent of language learners who really want to learn a foreign language (i.e. who are really motivated) will be able to master a reasonable working knowledge of it as a minimum, regardless of their language aptitude.

About the content of this book

This book is the first of its kind in the second/foreign language (L2) field that is entirely devoted to discussing *motivational strategies*, that is, methods and techniques to generate and maintain the learners' motivation. Although a great deal has been written in the past about *what* motivation is, describing its components and dimensions and how these influence learning, very little has been said about *how* this theoretical knowledge can be applied in the actual classroom. If classroom practitioners are thinking (justifiably) that researchers have generally left them to their own devices by not saying too much practically relevant about the topic, this book is intended to offer some remedy to that situation.

Although, as you will see, this is a practical book with only a limited theoretical discussion, the concrete classroom ideas that I will present are based on sound theoretical considerations. During the past two decades I have worked as a language teacher, teacher trainer, full-time

researcher, university lecturer and PhD programme director, and the following chapters will contain the distillation of my own experiences, as well as a review of the relevant educational psychological and L2 literature. If you are interested in a more detailed discussion of the theoretical and research background of motivation, please refer to the 'Further reading' box at the beginning of Chapter 1.

How to use this book

As the author of this book, it may be surprising to hear me say that when I read books of the 'how-to-be-successful-in-business' or 'how-to-motivate-learners' type, they tend to make me feel inadequate and de-skilled rather than inspired. Even otherwise excellent manuals in educational psychology that are specifically designed for teachers can overpower with the wealth of ideas and recommendations they contain. During the process of writing this book, I became very much aware of the challenge of writing a 'what-to-do' book on motivation: How can we present a wide range of options for teachers to choose from that will inspire positive action? How can this presentation be rich and varied but avoid being daunting and making readers feel how complex the domain is and how much they are *not* doing?

In trying to respond to this challenge, I have tried to give the text three features that I feel are important, namely that it should be *short* (because few of us have much time in further education), *systematic* (because there is not much point in providing background material if it needs to be supplemented with other sources to get the full picture) and *interesting* (because I dislike boring books – although I admit that it is not that easy to write a 'pageturner' on motivation).

So what is the best way to use this book? The most obvious place to start reading any book is Chapter 1, but this may not be the best strategy in this case. Chapter 1 contains a theoretical overview of motivation which serves as background material and is not absolutely necessary for the successful adoption of motivational strategies. The classroom techniques are described in Chapters 2–5 and some readers may want to go there straight away. You may also decide to select a motivational area you are particularly interested in or concerned about from the table of contents or the subject index and look up the discussion of that particular issue, thereby using the text as a reference book.

A somewhat unorthodox approach might be – and this would be my recommendation to most readers – to start reading this book at the very end, that is, at the Conclusion. There I argue that in developing one's

motivational repertoire it is not the quantity but the *quality* of the selected strategies that matters. Rather than trying to acquire all the strategies at once, for most people – certainly for me! – it is more useful to take a selective and stepwise approach, choosing a few strategies that would suit your teaching style and learner group well. In the light of this, the Conclusion offers general guidelines and concrete suggestions on how to achieve this gradual move towards a motivation-sensitive teaching practice.

All the best!