Motivational Teaching: Value and Success-expectation

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Abstract

Many language learners have a vision of their 'Ideal Future L2 Self' (Dörnyei, 2009), somebody they see themselves as being once they have mastered a language. Every teacher wants to be motivational, to keep their learners on track during a long and often arduous language learning pathway, and one way of doing this is to connect what happens in the classroom with these learners' visions. However, not all language learners will have such visions. Many who are in compulsory education might feel that foreign language learning is just a subject on the timetable – perhaps even one more opportunity to fail. Teachers in this environment will be looking for other ways to motivate. In this article, I suggest that Expectancy-Value theories offer pointers which help us address motivational challenges presented by both groups of learners.

Expectancy-Value Theory

According to Atkinson & Raynor (1974), our decision to do something is influenced by a force which is the *product* of the **value** attached to a goal and the **success expectancy** of achievement, and when one or the other is zero, there is no motivation to perform an action. I once went to Lambada dancing classes, visioning my ideal future dancing self as an in-group member of a happy throng on a Rio dance floor. The vision and value were there, but my expectancy of success quickly evaporated as my two left feet began to seriously hamper my progress.

Value

The value attached to a goal is inextricably linked to an individual's vision of their Ideal Future L2 Self. No matter what the vision (it might be one of a successful business person or an air traffic controller, for example) what happens in a learning situation has to be perceived as having value. It must be relevant to a learner's particular aspirations if motivation is to be maintained. Learners must be able to answer the question '*Why am I doing this?'* when engaged in various activities. If they can't, there is a risk that the incentive value of a task or activity is reduced and this could impact negatively on motivation.

In today's world, most future L2 selves will be people using the language in some way; it might be communicating with native or non-native English language users, either face –to-face or through other media (via emails, blog posts, facetime or skype, for example). It is a desire to be able to do something with the language, rather than simply knowing about it, and this provides teachers with a strategy for getting learners to *value* what is being done in the classroom.

So, what will a course for learners who are aiming to be effective users of a language look like? From my teaching experience, a course based on an 'action-oriented approach' to language and learning as described in the Common European Framework of Reference (2001) will serve to make transparent the relationship between a learner's goals or vision and what is taking place in the classroom. This approach provides learners the opportunity to deal with the nuts and bolts of the language, grammar, vocabulary and so on, and to draw on what they know to carry out real-world communicative tasks. The main thrust is on *doing* rather than *knowing.*

In many coursebooks nowadays, it is not unusual to find *Can do* statements, for example, *I can talk about unreal situations.* These imply an action-oriented approach to language. In spite of their presence, though, they sometimes appear tucked away at the end of a unit or embedded in a contents page, thus, remaining unreferenced by a teacher or learner. If your coursebook has *Can do* statements, pointing them out or raising their profile to frame a lesson before you start can help to forge the link between language activities and the real world and, consequently, help maintain motivation.

What if your coursebook doesn't present *Can do* statements? It might be that, with slight rephrasing, you could morph a grammar label like 'reported speech' into a communicative task, *'I can report what people say'.* Or, let's imagine you're teaching food vocabulary with a language focus on quantifiers – why not ascribe an action-oriented focus at the beginning of the lesson, for example *I can talk about my eating habits* or *I can explain how to cook something*?

Once an action-oriented label is decided upon, it's worth taking a little time to check that learners will indeed have the opportunity to use the language in a relevant communicative task. Failing to provide such an opportunity in the lesson will result in the reference to action appearing rather cosmetic and consequently weaken the motivational real-world pull. Including practice activities such as role-plays will help position the lesson experience in the realm of the Ideal Future L2 Self. Even for learners who have might have little or no current motivation to use the language in the real world, seeing the purpose of classroom activities provides practical appeal and help make lessons more engaging. These action-oriented labels also provide a yard-stick by which learners can perceive a sense of success and gradual progress. They can also function as short-term goals.

Success-expectancy

As mentioned earlier, a learner's motivation will only be maintained if he or she both values what they are doing *and* they expect to succeed – one without the other will result in a lack of motivation. Setting up 'doable', i.e. reasonably challenging but not easy, classroom activities which inculcate success-expectancy has helped me generate motivation in both secondary school and university students who are experiencing learned helplessness as a result of previous educational failures, either in their general education or foreign language learning classrooms. Once success-expectancy exists for the individual, he or she starts to ascribe value to classroom language learning

experiences as successes help maintain self-esteem (self-worth theory) and individuals perceive their own abilities (self-efficacy theory).

Weiner (1979) points out that if past learning experiences lead learners to believe they have a low ability which is beyond their control, they will be unlikely to expect to succeed. Our challenge then, particularly with learners who don't value language learning or have an attainable 'Ideal Future L2 Self', is to demonstrate that ability is not fixed, and that efforts exerted can make a difference to a performance. To help learners see that their efforts make a difference, teachers can introduce strategies to help deal with a listening or reading task. We can present functional language necessary to effect spoken communication breakdowns, and techniques or approaches to employ when writing particular types of texts. In other words, we can show learners how to overcome difficulties and this increases their sense of self-efficacy - they can see that ability isn't fixed and that the efforts they exert themselves will impact on their performance. They are no longer helpless.

Informative teacher feedback on a task also has a significant role to play as it is the means by which we offer comments on why individuals did well and what they could focus on in order to improve. As Williams and Burden (1997) point out, teachers need to exercise caution and be aware of the dangers of an over-reliance on hollow praise, simply saying 'well done' or 'very good'. Instead, teachers should provide feedback which enables learners to 'identify specific aspects of their performance that are acceptable and capable of improvement by some specified means, it should be both helpful and motivating to them to move into the zone of next development'.

If learners are given a communicative task to do in class, let's say, talking about unreal situations, teachers can provide informative feedback by selecting and commenting on 2 or 3 criteria that are traceable to lesson activities, and which could even be given to learners at the beginning of a task. Feedback should be informative, positively oriented, and focussed on what an individual 'can do' in order to protect their self-esteem.

Informative feedback also helps a learner develop a mastery rather than performance orientation towards learning (Ames, 1992). Mastery-oriented learners display an intrinsic interest in learning activities and a positive attitude towards learning, whereas learners with a performance-oriented approach tend to be more concerned with grades or marks rather than the learning process. Armed with informative feedback, a learner is encouraged and empowered to become more mastery oriented and thus develop an innate interest in learning (Deci, 1985). 'In this way, we encourage learners to persist by actively engaging them in the learning process, we provide them with the means to further success and we drive intrinsic motivation and effective learning' (McDonald, 2009).

Conclusion

Success-expectancy and value have been the most researched factors in the area of motivation and the realisation of both in the language learning classroom is of

paramount importance for teachers seeking to both generate and maintain motivation. 'The greater the perceived likelihood of goal-attainment and the greater the incentive value of the goal, the higher the degree of the individual's positive motivation' (Dörnyei 1998).

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