

MOTIVATION ISLAND

by Mark Hancock

The island is divided into four quarters corresponding to four principle ways of motivating: **firstly**, by making the content of your lessons inspiring, making **secondly**, the lessons clearly useful, **thirdly**, by ensuring that the task of learning is really **doable**, and **fourthly** by making sure that the classroom environment is **convivial**.

SUBJECT (LANGUAGE AND CONTENT)

So let's begin with the '**inspiring**' corner of the map. The idea is that here, we can motivate through the **subject** we are teaching - both the **language**, and the **content** which is conveyed through the language.

This may be partially achieved through you, the teacher, being **enthusiastic** about what you teach, and making that enthusiasm **evident** to the students. You'll also need to make sure the content is **relevant** - something the students can understand and identify with, and which they are likely to find **interesting**. Also the activities in your lessons can motivate by allowing **personal investment** on the part of the students - tasks which allow them to **express** themselves and their own enthusiasms.

It's also worth mentioning the **surprise** factor here. Surprise is a real **attention magnet**, while a totally predictable routine tends to kill off attention.

ASPIRATIONS

So let's move now to the '**useful**' corner of the map. Students will perceive a lesson to be **useful** if they can understand how it contributes to achieving their **aspirations**.

Their aspirations may be purely **extrinsic**, such as passing an exam or getting a better job. They may want to learn English for purely **instrumental** reasons - to communicate for a specific **purpose**. Or they may have a more **intrinsic** motivation, such as a wish to become better acquainted with the language and culture.

If their purpose is just to pass an exam, then teachers can - and often do - try to motivate by making their lessons into exam rehearsals. In this case, the shape of the course is determined by the exam - a process known as '**washback**'.

If their purpose is to be able to communicate with speakers who don't share their mother tongue, then the teacher will need to demonstrate how each teaching point **prepares** for or **practices realistic communication**. This kind of realism is known as '**action-orientation**', and lies behind the description of language competences in the Common European Framework of Reference, or **CEFR**.

Whatever the students' objectives are, the teacher needs to make sure that whatever they teach has **value** in terms of achieving them, and not only that, but to make this value visible, or **transparent**, to the students. We also need to remember that the student's long-term aspirations can't be fulfilled all at once, and we need to show them how the task can be broken down through short-term **goal-setting**.

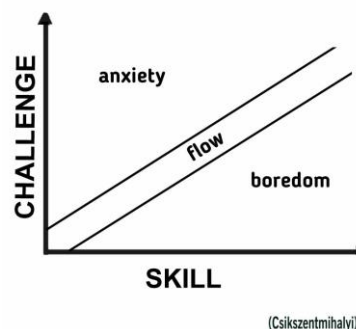
In the worst case scenario, the learners are in compulsory education and have **no** aspirations at all regarding English. In this case, a teacher will be better advised to focus on the **other** three corners of the Map of Motivation.

LEARNING

Next, we turn to the **Learning** corner of the map. This is the true **motor** of motivation. Let's imagine a student's aspirations are a **tow-truck**, **pulling** them along. Then, in this image, Learning is a **motor** which allows the student, eventually, to move forward **under their own drive**, **autonomously**. In order for learning to become this motor, a

student has to succeed - and **know** it. Consequently, your class needs to be **success-oriented**. But this can't simply be setting the bar so low that everyone succeeds effortlessly. They need the experience of meeting a **challenge** and **overcoming** it through their own **effort**, firstly with **support** and later, without help. Teaching without support = testing. With regard to this, psychologist Csikszentmihalyi's concept of **Flow** is helpful:

Picture a graph with **challenges** increasing up the **vertical** axis and **skills** increasing leftwards along the **horizontal** axis. If you draw a **diagonal band** rising up from the bottom right corner, this shows the place where there is an **ideal balance** between challenges and skills. In the area above this band, the task is too difficult in relation to the student's skills, causing an **anxiety** which demotivates. In the area below the band, the language and content is too easy in relation to the student's skills, causing **boredom** which also kills motivation. Within the band, where the balance is ideal, the student is capable of becoming 100% **absorbed** in exercising his or her skills to the full, and this state, which is called '**Flow**', is extremely motivating. If the task is too difficult, you may need to provide **support**, or **scaffolding** to begin with. You can then gradually reduce the level of support.



Students need to **succeed**, but they also need to **know** when they are succeeding, and this self-knowledge comes from **reflection** and **self-assessment**. To facilitate this reflection, you need to provide **clear, objective** criteria by which to **measure progress**, such as the '**can-do**' statements recommended in the **CEFR**. Of course, a student may rightly self-diagnose that he or she has **not** performed satisfactorily in a given task, and in this case, you should encourage them to **attribute** this to insufficient **effort** rather than insufficient **ability**. Effort is something they can **do** something **about**, whereas **ability** is relatively **fixed**. Attributing failure to lack of ability leads to an 'I'm no good at languages' attitude, and that's a motivation wrecker.

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CLASSROOM CORNER

Finally, at the opposite corner of the map, we find the '**convivial**' corner. Here is where we focus on the **social** aspect, recognising that the **classroom** is a mini-society, and that your students will have a **social motivation**. The key is to recognise that learning a language is a **face-threatening** activity. A student is in constant danger of appearing **foolish** in front of his or her peers, and of course, you. If their **self-worth** is damaged in this way, they are unlikely to make progress. Language learning requires the learner to **risk** sticking their neck out, and if there is **fear of humiliation** in your classroom, they are unlikely to do this. You need to actually **encourage** them to take risks by ensuring that errors do not create any **loss of face**. Lead by example by **not** ridiculing bungled attempts, and **not** being over zealous in correcting a student who is clearly trying to communicate something meaningful. Encourage an **atmosphere** of **cooperation** in the class, where students feel responsible for one another's progress. In a strongly competitive environment, failure can all too easily lead to a damaging **loss** of self-worth and consequently, motivation.

Csikszentmihalyi, M. 2002, *Flow*. London: Rider