

Telling ELT Tales out of School

Motivation: the inside story<sup>†</sup>

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**Abstract**

In this article, we will look at the difference between extrinsic and intrinsic motivation, and why extrinsic motivation alone is not satisfactory for learning in the long run. It is suggested that although students may embark on learning for extrinsic reasons, a more intrinsic motivation can be developed in the classroom. A taxonomy of intrinsically motivating materials and tasks is proposed, based on the four categories *interest, personalization, entertainment* and *challenge*.

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"Many people give up on learning after they leave school because thirteen or twenty years of extrinsically motivated education is still a source of unpleasant memories. Their attention has been manipulated long enough from the outside by textbooks and teachers, and they have counted graduation as the first day of freedom." (Csikszentmihalyi, 2002).

Three key terms in this quote are *motivated, attention* and *learning*, and they are closely related. Attention determines what appears in consciousness, and without it no learning can be done. Attention is a kind of psychic energy, an effort of the mind, and to make this effort, you must be motivated to do so. The quote implies that there is more than one kind, or quality, of motivation; it speaks of being *extrinsically* motivated, implying a contrast with *intrinsically* motivated. And it seems that these different kinds of motivation can lead to different learning outcomes - Stevick has pointed out, "In the long run, the quantity of your student's learning will depend on the quality of the attention they give to it" (Stevick, 1982). Csikszentmihalyi's quote is pessimistic about the quantity of learning which will result, in the long run, from relying exclusively on extrinsic motivation.

So what are these two kinds of motivation? Extrinsic motivation is the drive to learn in order to achieve something else unrelated to the content of what you are learning - for example, to pass an exam, to get promotion, to avoid punishment or to communicate more effectively whilst travelling. Intrinsic motivation on the other hand is the

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drive to learn something for its own sake - perhaps because you find it fascinating, or what you've seen of it intrigues you, or you've had enjoyable and effective learning experiences which you wish to repeat.

Extrinsic motivation can be related to ambition - an ambitious person will drive themselves to study in order to achieve their ends. If they are self-disciplined, they will be able to exclude competing demands on their attention and focus single-mindedly on their studies. And this determination may well pay off. However, extrinsic motivation can also be related to short cuts and cheating. If it's only the end which interests you, why not get there the easiest way? Why spend time doing a grammar exercise when you could just go straight to the answer key? With intrinsic motivation, short cuts and cheating are pointless. Imagine renting a DVD and just watching the end to save yourself the trouble of watching the whole thing. It doesn't happen, because the watching is precisely the point.

In an adult EFL class, you are perhaps unlikely to encounter learners who have exclusively one kind of motivation or the other. Most learners, no matter how extrinsic their motivation, are capable of becoming interested in some of what goes on in the class some of the time. Meanwhile, even the most intrinsically motivated learner probably has extrinsic motives for choosing precisely English from among the hundreds of world languages they could have chosen - English being so patently useful and available. So it's not a question of setting these two kinds of motivation up in opposition, but rather complementary drives which blend together. Unfortunately, as Csikszentmihalyi's quote at the start of this paper suggests, the balance in many people's experience of education has been too heavily weighted towards the extrinsic, which justifies a special focus on intrinsic motivation now to redress the balance.

In Williams and Burden's book *Psychology for Language Teachers* (1997) they trace back certain theories of motivation to a theoretical assumption of 'homeostasis' - namely that animals - and people - prefer *not* to be in a state of arousal. That is, we would prefer to be in a state of having all our physical and intellectual needs satisfied. However, experiments have shown this not to be the case, and that even rats are motivated by curiosity and novelty. John McVicar Hunt (1961) identified motivating force of curiosity: we actively seek material which is surprising, incongruous or discrepant. To see what this might look like in more concrete classroom terms, consider the following example from Widdowson (2003). He suggests that there is a big problem with the following pedagogic text, with its accompanying illustration:

*This is a man. He is John Brown; he is Mr Brown. He is sitting in a chair. This is a woman. She is Mary Brown; she is Mrs Brown. She is standing by a table. Mr Brown has a book. The book is in his hand; he has a book in his hand. Mrs Brown has a bag...*

Widdowson's problem is not, as you might expect, that the text is so unnatural and unlike anything in real life. These things are not *necessarily* problematic. The real problem is that the text is boring. It tells us nothing that we didn't already know from the picture. The text is "simply a device for demonstration. As such, it offers nothing for learners to engage with". You might say that the text is too stable - there are no loose ends to provoke any kind of curiosity. Widdowson goes on to show us how, with a couple of modifications, we can introduce these loose ends: *This is a man. He is John Brown; he is Mr Brown. He is sitting in a chair. This is a woman. She is not Mrs Brown. She is standing by a table. She has a look in her eye. Mr Brown has an idea in his head. He has a book in his hand...* This second version of the text is certainly much more engaging - it has been transformed from pattern sentences into narrative. Suddenly, it has spark, and is much more likely to provoke intrinsic interest than the first version.

Williams and Burden go on to qualify the idea that surprising and incongruous material is motivating. They say that there is an optimum level of arousal, and if the material is too complex or incongruous, it can lead to confusion, anxiety and avoidance. This can be illustrated with the following diagram adapted from Csikszentmihalyi (2002):

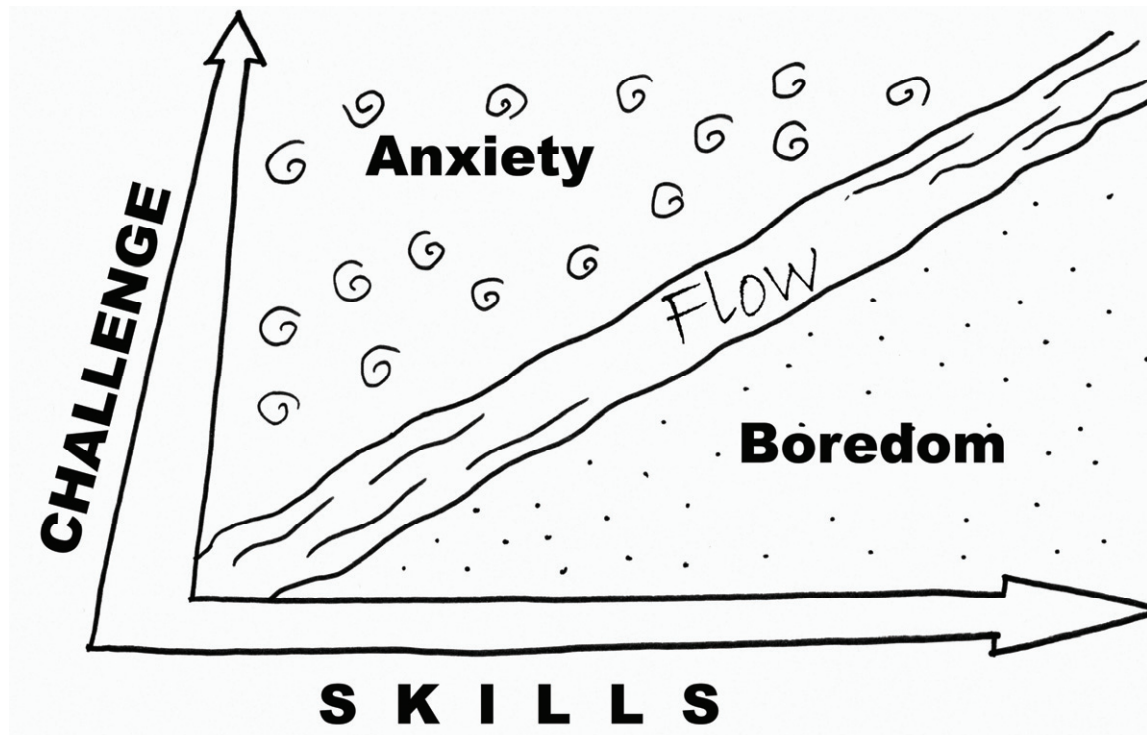


Figure 1. The diagram- adapted from Csikszentmihalyi (2002)

The diagram shows that if material is too difficult in relation to a learner's competence, it leads to confusion and anxiety, while if the material is too easy, it leads to boredom. Neither anxiety nor boredom are conducive to enjoyment or learning. "Enjoyment appears at the boundary between boredom and anxiety, when the challenges are just balanced with the person's capacity to act" (Csikszentmihalyi, 2002). Csikszentmihalyi calls the experience of being in this optimal boundary area 'flow', which he describes as "being utterly absorbed in something for its own sake because it's enjoyable and you feel effective." Material which is intrinsically motivating, we could say, is material which induces the experience of 'flow'.

What kind of EFL material is intrinsically motivating and most likely to induce 'flow'? Some indications may be found by looking outside the language classroom. What kinds of things do people do spontaneously in day to day life, without looking for extrinsic rewards? One candidate activity is playing computer games. Malone (1981) presented a theoretical framework for intrinsic motivation in the context of designing computer games for instruction. He argued that intrinsic motivation is created by three qualities: challenge, fantasy and curiosity. Challenge involves outcomes which are uncertain and which depend on a combination of luck and skill. Fantasy is the imagined world the player moves in. And curiosity is the intellectual arousal the player feels when they believe their knowledge is incomplete. Of these three, fantasy is the quality which seems most specific to computer gaming and less obviously applies to the adult EFL domain - which is not to say it is absent, in role-plays and simulations for example. It may be useful, following Malone's example for computer gaming, to develop a taxonomy of intrinsic motivations specifically for the EFL context, and this is what I will attempt to do in what follows.

My taxonomy can be summarized by the initials **IPEC**: Interest, Personalization; Entertainment; Challenge. We will look at each of these in turn.

#### I: Interest

Material which aims to provoke cognitive and sensory curiosity. This would include real world articles and images: human interest stories; amazing and curious facts; surprising customs; striking and incongruous photographs. Such material is abundant in modern course books, but since these are made for a wide audience and are printed long before use, they can't hope to tap into the interest which comes with up-to-the-minute issues of local relevance for a

given class. Nor can course books provide for specific individual interests since these are never going to be homogenous even in a single class.

#### P: Personalization

Material and activities which give learners the opportunity to express themselves and exchange information about their lives, beliefs, belongings, experiences, ambitions, habits, interests and so on. While the category Interest relates more to input material, usually texts, Personalization relates more to student output, often in discussions or written work. However, input texts of a more interactive nature can provoke a personalized response. An example would be the 'personality tests' which are so popular in magazines, or almost anything which allows an element of choice, such as a reading maze, where you choose where to go next. Once you have made a choice, you have a stake in the outcome and this is an attention magnet.

#### E: Entertainment

Material which aims to attract learner attention because it is funny, amusing, gripping, aesthetically pleasing, engaging or involving. Unlike the category Interest which addresses real world issues, this material is fictional, and examples would include short stories, plays, jokes, comedy sketches, films, music, poems, songs, cartoons and art. The fact that the content of this material is not 'real world' has sometimes been held against it in EFL. However, although the *content* may be fictional, the existence of such material definitely *is* real world. Fictions, narratives and language play fill our everyday lives outside the classroom as Guy Cook (2003) has pointed out. Indeed, part of what many of our learners hope to be able to do through English is have access to English language films, books, songs and so on.

#### C: Challenge

Material which requires learners to test their skills and luck in situations with an uncertain outcome. Like Personalization, this category is more about learner output than input. Examples would include puzzles, quizzes, guess work, detective work, collaborative games and competitive games. Note that this category may blend with Entertainment where the challenging activity is set in an imagined context such as a role-play - this is where Malone's category Fantasy sits within this taxonomy.

The IPEC taxonomy is intended as a way of keeping in mind all the possibilities when it comes to preparing or choosing teaching material and activities with intrinsic appeal. When we choose classroom texts and tasks, we obviously use the criteria of how well they suit our teaching point and how appropriate they are to the level of our students, but intrinsic appeal is often considered afterwards, as if it were an optional extra. However, if you believe as I do that learning is more likely to be effective when learners are to some extent intrinsically motivated, then it make sense to be more systematic in using intrinsic appeal as a criterion in preparing or selecting material.

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