

Project work: motivation and language-learning

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In the teaching of English as a second language, attitude to the target language and culture contributes to the degree of motivation in the student and there are, in fact, a variety of motivating factors that lead to the desire to communicate with speakers of the target language. The teacher's job is to set up the necessary framework for these motivating factors to come to the fore. Project work outside the classroom can play a significant role in promoting a positive attitude to the second language and culture while, at the same time, providing the necessary conditions for language acquisition. It also fulfils a number of other motivation-related purposes and can, in some cases, make the most of an environment which is particularly propitious to second language learning.

It has been suggested that adults learn a second language through both sub-conscious language acquisition and conscious language learning – the former, according to S. D. Krashen (1988) being the more important. Related to these systems are what many have termed aptitude and attitude. While aptitude seems to be connected to conscious learning, attitude relates to acquisition.

Gardner and Lambert (1972) studied the effect of attitude on language learning and came to the conclusion that certain attitudes to the target language and culture motivated the learner to a greater or lesser extent: «motivational variables... determine whether or not the student avails himself of ... informal language contexts» (Gardner, Smythe, Clement, and Gilksman, 1976, p. 200). These attitudinal factors can facilitate the reception of input and what is heard can be used in turn in performance. According to S. D. Krashen, (1988), these factors «encourage acquirers to communicate with speakers of the target language, and thereby obtain the necessary input, or intake, for language acquisition».

He names several attitudinal factors which influence the degree of language acquired. "Integrative motivation" is the desire to become members of the community speaking the target language, encouraging learners to interact with speakers of the second language. Another type of motivation, termed "instrumental motivation", is

when the desire to communicate springs from the necessity to do so, for example if proficiency in the language is necessary for professional reasons such as getting a job or obtaining promotion.

Personality factors are, of course, also related to degrees of motivation. A confident student will tend to be more receptive to input than one who is introverted or anxious and a person with fewer inhibitions will be likely to acquire more fluency as he will naturally be less worried about making mistakes. As H. D. Brown (1977) says:

«Presumably the person with high self-esteem is able to reach out beyond himself more freely, to be less inhibited, and because of his high ego strength, to make the necessary mistakes involved in language learning with less threat to his ego» (pg. 352)

A further motivational factor, according to Krashen is empathy. If the learner can identify with speakers of the target language he appears to be more susceptible to acquisition. A learner who feels at ease with the teacher and with native speakers will, according to research, be more receptive than one who does not. It could then be concluded that a learner who is motivated by all these factors would achieve a high degree of success.

In a recent survey carried out in the School of Tourism and the Faculty of Translation and Interpreting (FTI) at the University of Las Palmas de Gran Canaria, students were asked to give the reasons for wanting to learn the second language. It was established that out of a hundred and twenty students, a hundred and eight were studying English because they needed it for their future professional lives and out of that same hundred and twenty, eighty six were studying it because they wanted to speak like a native speaker and felt that their lives would be enriched by so doing. These were encouraging results in the light of motivational factors which, as Brown (1987) points out, are not mutually exclusive. Not so encouraging, however, were the results on whether the students felt embarrassed when speaking the second language in front of their peers.

Out of a hundred and twenty, eighty-one said that they did. It seems likely that this embarrassment would also occur in front of the teacher and when learners are in contact with native speakers outside the classroom.

If these motivational factors do in fact heighten acquisition and hence performance, it is our job, as teachers, to provide as far as possible, the necessary conditions in which such motivation may take place. We should do our best to encourage a positive attitude towards the members of the cultural group whose language is being learnt. As Brown (1987) says: «...it seems intuitively clear... that second language learners benefit from positive attitudes and that negative attitudes may lead to decreased motivation and, in all likelihood, because of decreased input and interaction, to unsuccessful attainment of proficiency.»

The author goes on to say that negative attitudes can be changed. Here, the teacher has an important role to play in bringing about such a change with the help of carefully prepared techniques and materials, within the classroom and also by encouraging contact with other members of the cultural group outside the classroom.

It is here that our students in the Canary Islands must take advantage of the privileged position they occupy – namely an environment in which the language being learnt is, as it were, on their doorstep. Not only do they have access to native speakers and their culture, but also, in the case of the English language, to non-native speakers of English due to the fact that the islands are frequently visited by tourists of many different nationalities who use English as a means of communication. Thus, from a language learning point of view, the Canary Islands' environment is doubly unique as it encourages acceptance of cultures other than that of the learner as well as providing language-learning opportunities.

How then can we encourage our students to go out and meet the speakers of their target language? One of the most effective ways is to organise some sort of project work which will enable the students

to communicate in the target language with native and/or non-native speakers of English, thus obtaining the necessary input for acquisition and the chance to get to know, understand and accept the culture of the people whose language they are learning.

Project work bridges the gap between the classroom and the real world, enabling students to put what they have learnt into practice in challenging, real-life situations and in direct contact with native speakers and their culture. Besides this, there are a number of other reasons for carrying out a project which deserve careful consideration.

The latest trends in second language teaching/learning are becoming more and more geared to learner autonomy both because it has been proved to be a successful method of learning and because the enormous task of learning a second language has finally been recognised. Taking into account the extent of the work involved for both teacher and learner, it must be realised that the two to four hours a week assigned to language classes can, under no circumstances, prove sufficient, especially as, in the case of Tourism studies, students have compulsory language training during only two of the three years needed to obtain the diploma. This certainly provides little time to develop the specialist language skills needed to see them through their professional lives in an ever-increasingly competitive working world. One way to overcome this problem is to promote work beyond the classroom, thus increasing the number of hours spent on the language-learning process.

Another important reason for organising a project is related to intrinsic motivation. Giving students more control over the learning process increases motivation. It is widely accepted that the more involved people are in the organisation of a venture, and the greater their responsibility, the more concerned they will be about its success. They will be striving to accomplish something for personal satisfaction and not just to satisfy the teacher. Project work also provides potential for taking into account different learning aptitudes and

speeds of learning as it enables students of different levels to work at their own speed giving rise to increased confidence and, as a result, increased input and performance.

Co-operation among learners is an important motivating factor and by working in a group, students are encouraged to learn and adapt research procedures to their needs and to be responsible for their own progress. They are motivated both by the other members and by the work itself which is of their own creation as they select and design what they are going to do while the teacher takes on the role of counsellor providing the necessary input, advice and support. The topics for students' projects frequently involve material from other subjects on their course, thus giving the project a multi-disciplinary character as students will need to use not only their knowledge of the language but also what has been learnt in other fields. For example, those studying Tourism may use knowledge gained in the study of the tourist environment, statistics or marketing etc. Consequently, they will share the opportunity to use information or material that might not have been dealt with in the language classroom and hence acquire new lexis related to their field of study.

Although there are projects which can be tackled by students with only an elementary knowledge of the second language, it is generally thought that project work does in fact require some command of the target language, which is yet another reason why it is particularly suited to our students whose level, at the start of their course is, in most cases, intermediate. Many learners at this level have reached what is termed the «intermediate plateau» and work of the nature we are discussing can often provide the necessary incentive.

A further advantage of project work is that it generally integrates the four skills of reading, writing, listening and speaking, in a natural way i.e. they are not imposed by lesson planning but arise according to the practical needs of each situation. During the first stage of the project there will normally be a great deal of listening and

speaking as the students listen to the ideas of others and put forward their own. Then when they move outside the classroom, all four skills will most likely be used. They will read material for ideas, they will prepare interviews, questionnaires etc. and then put them into practice in direct contact with speakers of the target language. The teacher can, of course, help to direct the project placing an emphasis on particular skills. For example, in the case of Tourism students, listening and speaking would probably be given preference over reading and writing, as their future professional lives will most likely take place in direct contact with the general public.

This brings us to how the project work should be organised. When dealing with large groups of an average of fifty students, the class should be divided up into smaller groups of four to six members, depending on the scope of the project. Students should be allowed to form their own groups as factors like personal friendships, proximity of living quarters, similar interests etc. help to provide a positive working climate and may contribute to the ultimate success of the work.

As regards the topic, groups of students should be allowed to choose their own subject but the teacher should give guidance if an emphasis on one particular skill is required. It is also important to ensure that the approach involves contact with speakers of the second language so that, as we have said above, the necessary input involving both language and culture learning is provided.

After discussing which topic is to be chosen by each group, there should then be a further division into sub-topics, each member of the group choosing which part of the project he/she would like to be responsible for. This step is important as it enables the teacher to make sure that the work is not being done by one or two members of the group. The teacher should then make a note of the different sub-topics and who is dealing with each one.

The next stage will be discussion in groups to decide how the work is to be done. At this point, the teacher should take on the

role of counsellor, listening to the students' ideas and giving an opinion either when asked to do so or if thought absolutely necessary to prevent time being wasted. The students must feel that each contribution is important. Some may feel nervous about coming into contact with speakers of the second language other than the teacher or their peers so the part of the work that involves spontaneous language situations should be given some preparation time in the classroom to boost their confidence and reduce anxiety. During these planning sessions the teacher should provide students with any necessary input. If they are going to hold interviews when they move outside the classroom they should have a certain command of the language required. As a starting point, for example, a good interviewer needs to have the basic skills in establishing contact, apologising for taking up people's time etc.

When the project work finally moves outside the classroom, this does not mean that there is no further work done in class time. There should be time set aside (this can be a quarter of an hour at the end of each class, for example) for the teacher to monitor the students' progress by checking on what they have learnt, seeing if they need any help, asking if they feel they are making headway and so on.

The next stage of the work will be when each member contributes his or her share and there is some sort of processing of the material gathered. The end product can be a piece of written work or an oral presentation in front of the rest of the class or a combination of both, in which case the written material can be accessed by the members of the other groups providing not only the input from their own work but also that of the other groups.

Finally there should be a discussion as to the value of the work done to see how much has been learnt in the way of target language and culture and whether the project has proved positive as a means of drawing the learner closer to the speakers of the second language reducing anxiety and boosting confidence.

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