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Preconditions for Effectiveness of Motivational Strategies in ESL/EFL Classroom: A Literature Review

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Abstract

Many teachers of English as a Second Language (ESL) or English as a Foreign Language (EFL) employ motivational strategies to help students learn more effectively. However, these strategies, despite being termed ‘motivational,’ do not always inspire genuine motivation among students. In light of this challenge, this literature-based study examines key preconditions necessary for the effectiveness of motivational strategies used by ESL/EFL teachers in their classrooms. Through thematic analysis, the study reviews relevant literature, including notable works by psycholinguists, published research articles, and related weblogs. It explores the concepts of motivation and motivational strategies within the ESL/EFL context, focusing on what makes these strategies impactful in the classroom. Findings indicate that factors such as student mood and attitude, cultural context, and linguistic comprehensibility are crucial for the success of teacher-driven motivational approaches. The study suggests further research to identify additional preconditions that may influence the effectiveness of motivational strategies in English language classrooms. Identifying these preconditions is expected to help teachers, administrators, and policymakers plan and apply motivational strategies more effectively, thereby enhancing learning outcomes of English language learners.

Keywords: effectiveness, ESL/EFL classroom, motivation, motivational strategy, preconditions

Introduction

The recent development and practice of English language teaching methods have been increasingly learner-centered where learner’s needs and interest are taken into consideration. It is widely agreed now that a learner should be motivated, and not forced, to learn. Motivation is a socio-affective factor that makes a learner willing to learn the language and put effort towards that direction. To generate and maintain motivation in learners, English language teachers use various kinds of motivational strategies in English as a second language (ESL) or English as a foreign language (EFL) classroom. But, sadly, not every

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motivational strategy generates motivation to learn in every situation. Experience tells that a certain motivational strategy works on some learners and not on others, or sometimes they generate the intended response and sometimes not. There is gap between the intended effect and the actual effect produced by these motivational strategies in the learners. Motivational strategies, as suggested by the name itself, are expected to generate motivation in the learners to learn. But many times no effect as such can be seen, which render these strategies quite useless. This very situation raises the question about the effectiveness of the motivational strategies used in the ESL classroom.

This research work raises the questions such as: Why don't teacher motivational strategies work always, everywhere, and upon everyone? When and whom do they successfully work upon? What are the preconditions that make these strategies actually work in the context of English language learning? Finding answers to these research questions is the purpose of this research work.

Methods and Materials

This research is based on a review of relevant literature, including notable works by psycholinguists, published research articles, and weblogs related to the topic. Using thematic analysis, it first explores the concepts of motivation and motivational strategies in ESL/EFL contexts. It then examines various theoretical and empirical studies to identify major preconditions necessary for the effectiveness of motivational strategies in ESL/EFL classrooms.

Results and Discussion

Motivation

Motivation is a psycho-affective factor that plays a very important role in learning. As Elis (1994) puts it, motivation is "the effort which learners put into learning an L2 as a result of their need or desire to learn it" (p. 715). So, it is something that makes one desire to learn or makes one feel the need to learn a language, which will make him/her put the necessary effort to learn that language.

Though not directly working in the field of language learning, the eminent psychologists like Abraham Maslow, B. F. Skinner, and Victor Vroom gave ideas on motivation which can be related to understanding how motivation generates in second language learning too. Maslow (1943) talked about hierarchical needs starting from physiological needs at the base to spiritual needs at the top. As one realizes the higher order needs, he/she will be motivated to achieve those needs. A language learner will be motivated to learn the language only if he/she realizes the need to learn the language. Similarly, Skinner (1953) talked about habit formation through reinforcements. The rewards like good grades and praise can motivate one to do well in language learning too. Vroom (1964) propounded the Expectancy Theory, which suggests that if a learner can expect to achieve desired outcome of a work, then he/she will be motivated to do that work. And to expect something, the person should be able to see some value in that thing, which makes it desirable. In the field of language learning, a learner is motivated to learn if he/she can see some value in the outcome of learning the language and can expect to achieve that outcome.

According to Dornyei (2001), motivation is rather a complex and abstract concept which can cover a variety of meanings in various fields. But to narrow down the meaning to educational psychology, a motivated student is one who is “a keen, committed and enthusiastic learner who has good reasons for learning, who studies with vigour and intensity, and who demonstrates perseverance” (Dornyei, 2001, p.1). It follows that such a student will learn better. And the more motivation a learner has, the better will he learn.

Scholars working on motivation in second language learning have attempted to classify motivation. Gardner and Lambert (1959) classified motivation into two types: integrative and instrumental. Integrative motivation refers to the motivation that arises out of the desire to integrate into the target language community or to identify with them. Instrumental motivation is the one that arises from the expectation of various gains and rewards due to the usefulness of the target language, such as good grades or good jobs (Astuti, 2016). Ryan and Deci (2000) classified motivation into two other types: intrinsic and extrinsic. Intrinsic motivation arises from the feeling of pleasure and satisfaction in doing certain activity, whereas, extrinsic motivation arises from the external rewards or outcomes like good marks or good jobs (Astuti, 2016). Since instrumental motivation comes under extrinsic type, we can take extrinsic motivation to represent a broader category. Combining the both classifications, it follows that there are three basic or major types of motivation: intrinsic, extrinsic, and integrative. Likewise, Dornyei (2009) has propounded the theory of L2 Motivational Self System, which is useful to understand learner’s sources of motivation. According to him, learner’s motivation is operated by three self-systems: i) Ideal L2 Self, which views oneself as an ideal or successful language user, ii) Ought-to L2 Self, which sees needs for oneself to learn a language in order to achieve some rewarding outcomes, and iii) L2 Learning Experience, which refers to immediate experience of pleasure and satisfaction that one gets while learning a language. These three self-systems correspond to integrative motivation, extrinsic motivation, and intrinsic motivation respectively (Laudari, 2014).

Motivational Strategies

Simply put, strategy is “a plan that is intended to achieve a particular purpose” (Oxford University Press, n.d.) In the field of English Language Teaching (ELT), Dornyei (2001) defines motivational strategies as “methods and techniques to generate and maintain the learners’ motivation” (p. 2). In another place, he explains them as “motivational influences that are consciously exerted to achieve some systematic and enduring positive effect” (p. 28). So, motivational strategies are the techniques or planned activities used by the teachers in the class to tap into the interest of the students and make them actively participate in language learning activities. Also, these strategies are not only used for generating the motivation, but for maintaining or sustaining it as well.

Over internet various motivational strategies can be found proposed or suggested by several teachers, educators, and educational institutions. They provide a list of strategies or activities that, they say, help motivate the learners to learn in the class. For example, Lesley University (*3 Strategies for Motivating ESL Students*, n.d.) provides three strategies for motivating ESL students: trigger their interests; integrate fun activities and technology; and encourage language experiences outside of the classroom. A blog post (Sanako blog, 2022)

lists 7 strategies to increase motivation in language learner: understand your students' motivations; prioritize pair and group work; create the right classroom environment; provide a clear path of success; personalize learning and give students agency; keep everything relevant and usable in real life; and give feedback. Similarly, Cabal (2017) suggests ways like involving the students actively in the class and making them talk more than the teacher; giving them chance to shine and cherish their success; making learning fun using games and competition; using different teaching materials like visuals, flashcards, infographics, etc.; making them sit and work in pairs; praising them; and not over-correcting.

Dornyei and Csizer (1998) listed ten macrostrategies which they called 'Ten Commandments for motivating language learners'. These ten macrostrategies are: 'set a personal example with your own behavior'; 'create a pleasant, relaxed atmosphere in the classroom'; 'present the tasks properly'; 'develop a good relationship with the learners'; 'increase the learners' linguistic self-confidence'; 'make the language classes interesting'; 'promote learner autonomy'; 'personalize the learning process'; 'increase the learners' goal-orientedness'; and 'familiarize learners with the target language culture'. These strategies seem designed to generate all the three types of motivation, namely, intrinsic, extrinsic, and integrative motivation.

Deci and Ryan's (2000) self-determination theory (SDT) mentions three things required for generating motivation in a learner: autonomy, competence and relatedness. Autonomy refers to the sense of freedom and control one feels over one's own learning. Competence is the ability one feels having in oneself to learn a language. Relatedness is the feeling of belongingness with other learners. Ushioda (2011) highlights learner autonomy, in particular. According to her, a language learner is a self-reflective autonomous individual, who is likely to be motivated to learn if he/she can experience personal freedom in the process of language learning.

Generating motivation is not enough, maintaining or sustaining it throughout the learning process is equally important. To this idea, Dornyei (2001) has given a big contribution. He has taken a process-oriented approach to motivational teaching practice. Motivational teaching practice (MTP), for him, is not an item of action but a comprehensive process that begins by creating motivational classroom environment with appropriate teacher behavior and things like classroom decorations. Then, motivation is initiated in the learners by increasing their goal-orientedness and expectancy of success. Motivation thus initiated is sustained throughout the class period by making learning stimulating and enjoyable through different learner-centered activities. Finally, the learners are provided with motivational feedback and rewards to keep them motivated even after the class is over. Thus, MTP undergoes a cycle of four phases: preparing, generating, maintaining, and encouraging motivation. Hence, it is not just one strategy but a package of several individual motivational strategies.

Recent trend has been to understand motivation increasingly as a dynamic factor, and the researches on Second Language Acquisition including motivation are conducted using Complex Dynamic Systems Theory (CDST), which views a language learner as a unique individual with his/her own diverse and ever-changing motivations influenced by modern

socio-cultural complexity and technological advancement (Liu, 2024; Li & Zheng, 2024). In light of CDST, it has been suggested that “teaching practices should be tailored to individual motivations and diverse contexts to achieve effective L2 proficiency” (Liu, 2024, p. 650). Motivation is, thus, conditional to individual’s psychological and cultural context, and the strategies to generate and maintain it should be tailored accordingly.

Preconditions for the Effectiveness of Motivational Strategies

Many researchers have investigated the question of whether motivational strategies are really effective or not in the context of teaching English as a second language or a foreign language (ESL/EFL). For example, Alrabai (2011) tested the effectiveness of motivational strategies in Saudi Arabian context by forming a control group and an experimental group of students. The control group was taught in the usual traditional way, whereas, the experimental group was taught using motivational strategies. The result showed improvement in experimental group’s classroom attention and participation behaviors. Likewise, Wondin (2020) studied the effects of motivational strategies on secondary as well as preparatory level students’ English language learning achievement in Ethiopia. The experimental group where motivational strategies were used for a certain period performed better than the controlled group where no motivational strategies were used, showing that motivational strategies do enhance English language learning achievement.

Dornyei (2001) makes a very important observation: “Motivational strategies cannot be employed successfully in a ‘motivational vacuum’ – certain PRECONDITIONS must be in place before any further attempts to generate motivation can be effective” (p. 31). Making this point, he moves on to mention and explain three preconditions: appropriate teacher behaviours and a good relationship with the students; a pleasant and supportive classroom atmosphere; and a cohesive learner group with appropriate group norms. In Dornyei’s (2001) framework of motivational teaching practice, these preconditions have been called “basic motivational conditions” (p. 29). And ‘creating these motivational conditions’ is the very first step in the process of motivational teaching practice, after which only, motivation can be generated in learners.

Aiusheeva and Guntur (2019) argue that teacher’s role is decisive in learner’s motivation. They list out various teacher-dependent motivational strategies, but make a point that “teacher’s awareness toward the cruciality of students’ motivation influences the strategies used by the teachers in order to raise motivation” (p. 452). They also stress upon shifting the teaching practices from teacher-centered to student-centered. Making teacher an agent of motivation they write, “ESL instructors should promote students’ autonomy, competence, relatedness, intrapersonal intelligence, positive emotions and attitudes” (p. 458). Dornyei (2001), in particular, discusses various teacher behaviors that influence a learner’s learning positively: enthusiasm; commitment to and expectations for the students’ learning; relationship with the students; and relationship with the students’ parents (pp. 32-40). All this suggests that effectiveness of motivational strategy is conditional to teacher’s appropriate behavior.

Assuming that the teacher has appropriate motivational behaviors and the physical classroom environment is also motivational, still there are other conditions which can render

the motivational strategies ineffective. Dornyei hasn't pursued this issue further, but this is exactly what has become the matter of exploration for this research.

Frahmand (2021) lists out three conditions for motivation in English language learning: positive outlook towards the second language culture, pleasure in learning, and external rewards. These three conditions correspond to the three types of motivation: integrative, intrinsic, and extrinsic, respectively. These conditions are the broad or general ones which inform the formulation of motivational strategies. But there has to be deeper conditions underlying these conditions, the investigation of which is the aim of this research.

Howard (2023) makes a critical review of the theoretical concepts and existing quantitative and qualitative researches on effectiveness of Teacher Motivational Strategies (TMS) in English as Foreign Language (EFL) contexts. In conclusion, the researcher makes two important points: motivation can be fostered if consciously used and specifically tailored, and effectiveness of motivational strategies can be limited by cultural context. These conclusions are important because they suggest the limitations of the motivational strategies regarding their effectiveness. If not consciously used or specifically tailored or in the absence of favorable cultural context, motivational strategies may lose its effectiveness.

It is again Dornyei's (2001) idea of motivational teaching practice which gives a very insightful understanding of motivation and motivational strategy: motivation is not enough to be generated, it should also be maintained or sustained. It is so because motivation is a very fleeting thing! One moment you are motivated, but next moment you may lose it. Dornyei (2005) says, "motivation is not seen as a static attribute but rather as a dynamic factor that displays continuous fluctuation" (p. 83). That's why he provides a package of strategies that help trap motivation in learners throughout the learning process (Dornyei, 2001). It also follows that motivation is a highly dependent factor – it depends upon many things for its generation and sustenance. Just a simple thing like classroom's physical environment (decorations) can make a significant difference.

The systematic review of both the theoretical and empirical studies on the effectiveness of motivational strategies in ESL/EFL classrooms highlights three key preconditions necessary for these strategies to be effective. These preconditions are:

Right Mood and Attitude

Dornyei (2005) defines Individual Difference (ID) as "characteristics or traits in respect of which individuals may be shown to differ from each other" (p. 1). He gives taxonomy of IDs which include personality, temperament, mood, language aptitude, motivation, learning styles, language learning strategies, anxiety, self-esteem, willingness to communicate, and learner beliefs (pp. 7-8). Because of such individual differences, motivational strategies will work differently on each individual learner. Dornyei says, "IDs tend to bring in a 'Yes but...' factor because there will always be people to whom some findings do not apply" (p. 2). Hence, it follows that because of so many individual differences of learners the general motivational strategies that teachers tend to apply in their second language classroom will have different impact upon different student. And it is perfectly

possible that a particular strategy will motivate some students more than others, or not motivate some others at all.

Karimi and Nikbakht (2019) says “that no single motivational strategy can always motivate every learner in any situation because of the dynamic character of the classroom context” (p. 26). They further say, “The effectiveness of a strategy is the result of the interaction between contextual variables, some of them are probably culture-specific, and others culture-neutral” (p. 26). These variables, according to them, include “approaches to learning and teaching, educational ideology, individual learners and teachers’ personality traits and emotional states, and the composition of the learner group” (p. 26). Just to take one variable, i.e., emotional state, it is not difficult to understand how a learner’s mental state during the time of learning can affect learning in a significant way. For instance, Saikia (2019) portrays adolescence as emotionally unstable age. He writes, “The sudden functioning of sexual glands and tremendous increase in physical energy makes him [adolescent] restless....Emotions during this stage fluctuate very frequently and quickly. It makes them moody. Sometimes they are very happy and at another time they are extremely sad and all this happens in a very short time” (147). Doniyorova and Ismoilova (2022) mention that adolescents desire to assume the role of adults in different guises. They want “to learn independently, to organize their own activities, to be self-governing, to develop new ideas, and so on” (p. 2). But they are also the ones who are characterized by factors such as “despair, mental turmoil, insecurity, hesitation, etc.” (p. 3). Hence, if a learner is in an angered or depressed mood, he/she is unlikely to be willing to take part in the learning activities however effective motivational strategy is used. It can be like trying to make somebody laugh by telling a joke during the time of grief. This situation relates to intrinsic motivation.

According to Dornyei (2001), “The intrinsic value of L2 learning is associated with the learners’ interest in and anticipated enjoyment of the language learning activity” (p. 53). In another place he says, “Intrinsic motivation concerns behavior performed for its own sake in order to experience pleasure or satisfaction...” (p. 10). So, what causes pleasure or satisfaction in learners? What if the learner does not enjoy the learning activity however motivating it may be? Pair works or group works are generally motivational, but what if the learner is shy or rather enjoys working alone? Language learning games are generally entertaining, but not everyone enjoys every kind of games. So, the strategies directly meant for intrinsic motivation (pleasure, satisfaction) too may not effectively work if the learner is in hostile or repellent mood and attitude. Right mood and attitude is akin to psychological preparedness essential for the effectiveness of motivational strategies.

Right Cultural Context

Dornyei and Csizer (1998) conducted an empirical research where “two hundred Hungarian teachers of English from various language teaching institutions were asked how important they considered a selection of 51 strategies and how frequently they used them in their teaching practice” (p. 203). Based on the teachers’ responses, the researchers compiled a concise set of ten motivational macro strategies, which they called the ‘Ten commandments for motivating language learners’ (p. 203). Cheng and Dornyei (2007) later conducted similar

survey in Taiwan to evaluate “the extent to which a comprehensive list of motivational strategies derived from Western educational contexts was perceived as educationally relevant by Taiwanese English teachers” (p. 171). They compared the result of the survey with that of Hungarian English teachers, and found that some motivational strategies like ‘displaying motivating teacher behaviour’, ‘promoting learners’ self-confidence’, ‘creating a pleasant classroom climate’ and ‘presenting tasks properly’ were valued by both Hungarian and Taiwanese teachers, but certain strategies like “*promoting learner autonomy*, which was recognized as a potentially effective motivational strategy in the Hungarian study, ... was perceived as possessing little motivational relevance by Taiwanese English teachers,” which indicated “that autonomy is not as highly valued by Chinese teachers as in Western contexts” (p. 171). The researchers thus concluded that “some motivational strategies are transferable across diverse cultural and ethnolinguistic contexts,” and “certain motivational strategies are culturally dependent” (p. 171). Using the same framework of Dornyei and Csizer’s Hungarian study, Wong (2014) tested the effectiveness of the motivational strategies in Chinese context, and found that “motivational strategies are culturally dependent, and there is no universal motivational strategy that can be applied to all EFL classrooms across all cultures” (p. 146). Astuti (2016), who researched in Indonesian context, also concluded that “some strategies are transferrable but some are culturally bound” (p. 19). All these findings show that the cultural context of a learner should be favorable for the motivational strategies to work.

Linguistic Comprehensibility

Dornyei has been widely read and his idea of MTP (2001) has been used as theoretical framework by many researchers. Astuti (2016) studied motivational teaching strategies and their effects in an Indonesian high school context. She collected the data and analyzed them using Dornyei’s framework of MTP. She found most of the strategies of MTP being used by Indonesian teachers. But not all strategies were transferable, some were “culturally bound” (p. 19). And she also found one strategy which was not mentioned by Dornyei, but prominently emerged in Indonesian context: “the use of L1” (p. 19). When the teacher used the first language (L1) to teach English in the class, some students, who didn’t understand English well, understood the lesson better and were motivated to learn further. So, here the question is whether students are understanding what the teacher is saying or not. If the students are not understanding what the teacher is saying, then they cannot feel connected to the teacher or the task given and is likely to lose their interest or attention. Equally important is the instructional clarity for the same effect. Even if the students are able to understand English quite well, if the teacher doesn’t give clear instruction, then they will feel lost and lose focus or interest in the task. It is again Dornyei (2001) who has made this observation: “...no matter how competent a motivator a teacher is, if his/her teaching lacks instructional clarity and the learners simply cannot follow the intended programme, motivation to learn the particular subject matter is unlikely to blossom” (p. 26). Hence, a student should be able to understand the message of the teacher. Whatever the teacher’s role, if the student cannot comprehend the language/message of the teacher (be it due to lack of clarity, or difficulty of English language), there cannot be the possibility of motivation.

Conclusion

Motivational strategies used by ESL or EFL teachers in their classrooms, though motivational in nature, may not work effectively in certain situations. Various factors act as preconditions for the effectiveness of these motivational strategies. The key preconditions identified by this study as necessary for the effectiveness of teacher motivational strategies in ESL/EFL context are:

1. Right mood and attitude
2. Right cultural context
3. Linguistic comprehensibility

For motivational strategies to work, a learner has to have right mood and attitude, right cultural context, and the needed linguistic comprehensibility. So, for whom do motivational strategies work best in the ESL/EFL classroom? The answer lies with students who possess the right mindset and attitude toward learning, who are situated in a cultural context that enables them to engage with and appreciate the lesson, and who have the linguistic comprehension necessary to understand the teacher's language in lesson delivery. Hence, the effectiveness of motivational strategies is conditional. A seed has the potential to germinate and grow, but it will only do so if it falls on fertile ground and amidst favorable environment. So is a motivational strategy. It has the potential to motivate. But it will only do so if it gets favorable state of learner's mind, language comprehending capacity, and favorable cultural context. The identification of these preconditions can be expected to help teachers, administrators, and policymakers plan and apply motivational strategies more effectively, thereby enhancing learning outcomes of English language learners.

Few studies have addressed the issue explored in this research work. In fact, only a limited selection of existing literature has been of substantial help, which represents a limitation of this study. Additional preconditions may exist, and identifying them can be a task for future research.

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