

STUDENTS' MOTIVATION, DEMOTIVATION AND AMOTIVATION IN SECOND LANGUAGE LEARNING¹

Abstract: *The aim of this paper is to present methods that will improve teaching as regards second language learning in order to motivate students in their learning process and to maintain their motivation constantly alert. The discussion also introduces and explains amotivation, in close connection with motivation and demotivation. Teachers have to continuously interact with their students effectively, be alert to their feedback, and constantly improve their methods of teaching a second language by staying connected with all the innovations in the field, and taking into consideration all the aspects of the teaching process that can decrease students' motivation in second language learning classes.*

Key-words: *motivation, demotivation, amotivation.*

Motivation has been perceived especially during recent years as one of the most significant factors in the process of second language learning. The aim of this paper is to reveal the reasons why some students become demotivated in the learning process, to introduce and explain what *amotivation* implies and to enhance the important role of teachers, that of constantly motivating students in relation to second language learning.

High motivation can replace major deficiencies in one's language skills and learning conditions since it is true that nowadays more and more students tend to lose confidence and become unwilling to get involved in different tasks and activities.

According to Ying Song from Dalian Maritime University: 'foreign language learning should emphasize the dynamic nature of the interplay between teachers, learners and tasks and learning arising from interactions with others.' (Ying Song, 2005: 80-81). In his opinion, learning environment or context is another important key-element since 'people will make their own sense of the various external influences that surround them in ways that are personal to them, or they will act on their internal disposition and use personal attributes in unique ways.' (*Ibidem*, p. 81).

In order to achieve effectiveness in second language learning, the teachers' skills in motivating learners should be looked at with the greatest attention and thus continuously improved. In this respect Ying Song discusses the ten strategies of utmost importance proposed by Zoltan Dornyei and Kata Csizer:

1. Set a personal example with your own behaviour;
2. Create a pleasant, relaxed atmosphere in the classroom;
3. Present the task properly;
4. Develop a good relationship with the learners;
5. Increase the learners' linguistic self-confidence;
6. Make the language class interesting;
7. Promote learner autonomy;
8. Personalize the learning process;
9. Increase the learners' goal orientedness;
10. Familiarize learners with the target language culture. (*Ibidem*)

As regards the fact that the teachers should always make and keep the language class interesting, further details may be taken into account – the tone of the teachers' voice

¹ Andreea Maciu, University of Pitești, Romania, andreea_maciu@yahoo.com.

must always be lively in order to capture and maintain the students' attention and interest. Otherwise, lessons may become boring, as some students actually related.

In order to motivate students in the process of second language learning, teachers should also emphasize the major role implied by the acquisition of foreign languages in contemporary society, and therefore the major role implied by second language learning for the students' future careers and even for their everyday life.

Teachers should also resort to explanations provided in a simple, effective language and not in a sophisticated, prolix one, in order not to decrease the students' interest.

Students may also become demotivated because of some teachers' evaluation approaches and in this respect two alternatives may unfortunately arise: teachers may either set goals that are too high, thus having too high expectations of their students, or, on the other hand, they may become much too understanding and set the goals to a minimum level, so that students will no longer be involved in staying motivated since language classes will reach a questionable, simple and boring level. Therefore, the teachers should be realistic and set proper, effective goals for their students.

An example of increasing students' motivation, taken from an actual class, would be the following: First, students have been given logical explanations and connections between the new notions that have been introduced to them in the process of learning; afterwards, they are placed in practical situations to develop the new notions in a proper manner, situations in which if they should make some mistakes, they are only informed that somewhere there is a mistake and allowed, and even prompted, to discover the mistakes themselves. Practical, everyday situations taken from real life increase learners' linguistic self-confidence and hence also, implicitly, their motivation. Therefore, one refers here to language activities that, as one has already noticed, are more likely to be assimilated by students since they find them more enjoyable and more useful.

Students are often willing to travel a lot, being interested in all that is new and challenging; the teacher should emphasize the importance of knowing how to interact properly in real-life situations, in a foreign context of life, in order for the students to be understood and to understand correctly what they are communicated.

On the other hand, there is the actual interest of the teacher in obtaining success in the process of learning in the pragmatic, money-oriented society we live in, since unfortunately, with more or less obvious, demotivation of the teacher himself comes the demotivation of the students.

Demotivation, on the other hand, will certainly occur together with, for example, conflicts with peers, public humiliation or disheartening test results. One can also mention some other types of situations: belligerence, hypercriticism, favouritism, lack of caring, lack of enthusiasm, classroom activities that include irrelevance or repetitiveness, as can be seen from the content analysis of essays written by 250 American students, analysis realized by Rebecca Oxford in 1998 and noted by Dimitris Thanasoulas in his paper *Discourse in Teaching a Foreign Language* (Dimitris Thanasoulas, 2002: 64).

Another aspect that should be taken into account when speaking about demotivation is the fact that it can also derive from external sources and not from the class environment: it can derive from home, should, for example, the student's siblings have told him that second language learning would be boring or secondly, from the student's previous experience in learning language.

Actually, the level of motivation is not always stable, thus, being variable even with the same learner and even during the same class. The same process also occurs in the

case of demotivation, as mentioned by Jenni Muhonen in *Second Language Demotivation: Factors That Discourage Pupils from Learning the English Language*: 'Demotivation does not mean that a learner has lost his or her motivation completely. On the contrary, the positive influences that originally made up the motivational basis of behaviour can still be there. For instance, a learner may still be highly motivated to learn English, it being an important world language, even if his or her teacher were, say, incompetent or malevolent. When a learner has lost his or her motivation completely that refers to *amotivation*. The difference between these two related concepts is that while an *amotivated* learner is someone who has found the general outcome expectations to be unrealistic for some reason, a demotivated learner is someone whose motivation has decreased due to some external factors.' (Jenni Muhonen, 2004: 17).

Therefore, the term '*amotivation*', introduced in 1985 by Deci and Ryan, signifies the absence of motivation due to the fact that the respective individuals have experienced feelings of incompetence towards the learning activity. The term does not render the students' initial lack of interest in the matter.

Zoltan Dornyei and Richard Schmidt noted that *amotivation* can have four sources, according to Vallerand's overview – 'People can be amotivated because:

- they think they lack the ability to perform the behaviour («capacity- ability beliefs»);
- they do not consider strategies to be followed effective enough («strategy beliefs»);
- they think the effort required to reach the outcome is far too excessive («capacity-effort beliefs»);
- they have the general perception that their efforts are inconsequential considering the enormity of the task to be accomplished («helplessness beliefs»).' (Zoltan Dornyei, Richard Schmidt, 2001: 144).

The role of the teachers in helping to avoid students' demotivation, as well as *amotivation*, is to support the latter, to encourage them and moreover to praise them for their contributions, that is to resort to *positive incentives* for them to constantly motivate their listeners. It is true that even demotivated students feel the need to be encouraged and praised for their accomplishment of the tasks.

The mistakes that teachers may come across in the process of teaching can be of the following types, as described by Zoltan Dornyei and Richard Schmidt:

- the teachers may go on and on with the same explanations, thus being redundant and having lost the students' interest and focus ;
- on the other hand, the teachers may not explain things sufficiently in order to make themselves clearly understood;
- the teachers may not give clear enough instructions;
- the teachers may use inferior equipment (e.g. for listening tasks);
- the teachers may criticise students;
- the teachers may shout at students when the latter do not understand;
- the teachers may use old-fashioned teaching materials.

Teachers have to constantly improve their professional skills since language, broadly speaking, is a living organism in continuous transformation. They also have to pay close attention to the way they are perceived and understood by their students for the benefit of the learning process as a whole. The effort implied in this task goes both ways, and has to be maintained by both students and teachers, since nothing that comes easily is consistent and valuable.

The main demotivating factors, identified by Dornyei, which must be combatted are:

1. The teacher (personality, commitment, competence, teaching method). Possible mistakes in this case: the teacher may shout at the students, he may not attend classes when the weather is bad, negative incentives, favouritism, etc.;
2. Inadequate university facilities (group is too big or not the right level, frequent change of teachers);
3. Reduced self-confidence (experience of failure or lack of success);
4. Negative attitude towards second language learning;
5. Compulsory nature of second language learning (imposed by family);
6. Interference of another foreign language being studied;
7. Negative attitude towards second language learning community;
8. Attitudes of group members (being laughed at by group members when making a mistake triggers the student's dislike of the respective group members and is also a demotivating factor for the student);
9. Coursebook used in the language class (negative attitude towards the coursebook).

The main conclusion that can be drawn from this paper is that teachers have to continuously interact closely and effectively with their students, be alert to the feedback provided by them, and constantly improve their methods of teaching a second language by staying connected with all the innovations in the field, taking into consideration all the aspects of the teaching process that can subtly in time or suddenly and perhaps irrevocably decrease students' motivation in second language learning classes.

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