

An Informative Reflection on Motivation, Technology and the Non-major English Language Classroom

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The age of technology has brought with it some great tools to the education system. From cassette tapes on to video, television and now computers and the Internet, the resources available both for personal and educational uses are ever increasing. Technology can be a useful motivational asset in the non-Major English conversation classroom, helping to face some of the challenges of teaching in the non-major English classes.

Specifically in Japan, teachers have faced many challenges in motivating non-English major students in foreign language classes. Kelly examined the difference in motivation between English major and non-English major students. He found that “non-English major students perceive English as less relevant to their lives in general, but enjoy studying English and find it a worthwhile challenge (32). Students often enter their first year with this positive attitude towards English study but can often quickly lose their motivation.

Students of non-major English classes are often less motivated to study English especially after being in the university system. M. Kelly explains,

The instrumental motivation possessed prior to writing the entrance exam diminished once it has been passed. Although some students remained enthusiastic, many attended classes solely because they were compulsory, a situation described as a motivational wasteland. (35)

The motivation that saw them through university entrance exams is mostly gone by the time they enter their first year English Conversation course. “Typically, upon entrance to the desired establishment, the student’s interest to continue study declined” (Norris-Holt 4). Students, however, are more interested in each other, in communicating and even in trying to communicate using English. Tired of grammar, reading and general book study, students come into their first year English conversation class looking for something new. “Students...were most interested in speaking, listening and learning about foreign cultures” (Kelly 36).

In M. Kelly’s study, non-major English Conversation students were found to be motivated intrinsically, meaning, students were motivated by their enjoyment of the task itself not by their overall improvement in their language level. “Intrinsic motivation is accessible to teacher influence by generating tasks that the student perceives as worth while and enjoyable (33). Teachers can affect

their students' motivation through their choice and implementation of lesson topics.

Everyday life increasingly relies on technology. From the alarm clock in the morning to the final e-mail at night, life is becoming more and more intertwined with technology. Pete Sharma, a lecturer at Oxford Brookes University, UK, describes technology as “becoming ever more ubiquitous” (15). How then can it be included in the English language classroom? If it is true that “teacher skills in motivating learners should be seen as central to teaching effectiveness”, how then can teachers use technology to meet the motivational needs of their students (Dornyei 116)? What effects can technology have on student motivation? In dealing with this ‘motivational wasteland’, how can the classroom teacher not merely survive but also ignite an interest in English language learning in students? This paper will set out to explore different uses of the computer and Internet in the English language classroom and provide personal reflection on the effects of the use of technology on motivation in the non-major English language classroom.

The Computer and Internet in the English Language Classroom

The amount of language software available for the English language classroom increases yearly. Programs vary in topics and emphasis, with many lending themselves to improving communication skills such as pronunciation and intonation through the use of speech recognition software. Speech recognition is one area the computer can effectively be used in the classroom. Sharma explains, “[s]peech recognition... can be seen as a role for the computer within the area traditionally viewed as the domain of the language teacher” (14). Students are able to listen to a native speaker's example, record their own version and then see the results of their voice compared to that of the original example.

Listening exercises may also be enhanced through the use of the computer. Teachers can provide listening activities from Internet sites such as www.BreakingNewsEnglish.com. This site provides students with a recent news story to which they may listen and complete a provided gap fill exercise. Students are free to listen to the news story at their own pace, pausing and repeating, as they feel necessary. This can lend itself to motivate students to try the activity, taking away any aspects of competition. Teachers can control the relevancy of the topic matter and keep it within the interests of the students, thus, increasing student motivation.

Web searches can allow students the freedom to find information they are interested in. Given teacher-directed topics, students can search English news, music, sports or movie sites to build knowledge on a topic and study new vocabulary, creating a personal dictionary of new words. Even for beginners, this activity can help build vocabulary and stimulate interest in the other cultures and in the English world.

Internet video sites can be integrated into the language classroom using matching activities.

In advance, the teacher should choose 3–4 videos and write a brief summary of each video clip. Before watching the clip, students need to be given time to read the summaries and search for any unknown vocabularies. Upon watching the videos, students must match which video goes with which description.

Music can be a great bridge across the cultural divide between foreign teachers and language students. Music has often been used in gap fill listening exercises to build student vocabulary and general interest and motivation in class work. Using the computer, teachers can take the music gap fill exercise one step further. The computer provides students with voice recording opportunities. Students may be given a line or chorus from a song to practice and then repeat, recording their own version on to their computer. Files can then be sent to the teacher and advice given to help improve pronunciation and intonation. This activity provides some privacy to students who would rather not be singled out in class to complete this activity. Students can do the activity at their own pace or even as homework to avoid any embarrassment to shy students. Activities such as these can stir student interest in new topics and areas of learning, thus, building motivation within the classroom that the teacher can direct to further language study.

Motivation and the Computer: A Personal Reflection

Teachers should embrace the opportunities computers and the Internet offer to the English language classroom. “In order to make the language learning process a more motivating experience instructors need to put a great deal of thought into developing programs which maintain student interest (Norris-Holt 5). The computer and the Internet are useful tools for teachers in planning and implementing such programs. I have found that especially in non-major English language classrooms students have a low motivation to study English. Large classroom enrolments limit the ability of the teacher to teach English conversation effectively. The use of relevant texts may improve motivation to a degree but students still seem tired of text-based learning. After three years of using text-based lessons, I introduced computer-based and Internet-based lessons. The result was overwhelmingly positive. After a couple of initial lessons on the use of the computer and the introduction of some new English computer vocabulary, I began to integrate the computer and Internet into my lessons. The reaction from students was encouraging. Outside the complaint of having to carry a heavy computer to university, students were generally on task and motivated during class time. As Chambers states, “[i]f the teacher is to motivate pupils to learn, then relevance has to be the red thread permeating activities” (37). The use of computers and the Internet provided a solid base for the relevance of the learning activities. Even those students stuck in the ‘motivational wasteland’ seemed engaged in their learning. True to the intrinsically motivated learners of the non-major English language classroom, students perceived the learning tasks to be meaningful and enjoyable and were further motivated in

their learning.

Conclusion

Further studies and research should assess the relationship between technology and motivation. However, generally, as outlined in this reflection, the implementation of technology has a positive effect on the motivation of non-major English language students. Providing students with relevant and enjoyable language computer-based and Internet-based tasks that enhance their foreign language acquisition improves classroom atmosphere through developing the motivation of students. Under the constraints of classroom size and low motivation, technology gives teachers a helping hand in the planning and implementation of stimulating classroom activities.

References

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