Helping Our Learners Be Motivated

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Introduction

We teach English in Japan. While some of our students lack interest and do the minimum to pass tests, others are highly motivated, and their progress is amazing. Why are these two types of English learners so different? Although there are many factors involved, I would say that this difference boils down to one thing—*motivation*.

Humans can do anything if sufficiently motivated. There are physical limits; we cannot flap our arms and fly to the clouds. But, like Wilbur and Orville Wright, we can invent a flying machine. The human mind and body are immensely powerful when joined to achieve a purpose; the necessary fuel is motivation.

Perhaps the biggest challenge that we English teachers face is that this is Japan, a country where English has not been used except decoratively. And our students are aware of this. English is, strictly speaking, only mandatory for that artificial purpose of passing tests. And students often resent English (and us) for that reason. It is our responsibility to help unmotivated students find their motivation.

After I introduce myself, let us discuss the importance of motivation. Then, I will focus on these recent calamitous years and how they have impacted English education. And finally let us "wrap up" with some comments on the future. Please read on!

My Origin Story

I have been teaching in Japan for over 30 years. And I have thought a lot about the "big picture": Have I been wasting our time? Would I have benefited society more as a baker?

I have taught English since arriving from America in 1989. During my first year on the JET Program(me), I was an Assistant English Teacher (AET, nowadays ALT) at six junior high schools. During my second and third years, I taught at a commercial high school. There, I was often left alone to teach regular classes. I could develop my skills including lesson planning. I gained confidence as a teacher, and importantly, I discovered that I really *enjoyed* teaching.

These early years were a great, practical education for me. As an ALT simply assisting Japanese Teachers of English (JTEs), I had a stress-free time getting accustomed to the textbooks and students. And I had a priceless opportunity to see the various JTE's styles and approaches. When I finally had a chance to teach on my own, I chose to be a "fun teacher" as well as "an open book," talking about life and even laughing at my own bad jokes. I felt that would make the class fun and motivate the students to study.

From my fourth year, I began studying education at Temple University while continuing as a junior high AET on a private contract, shared among three towns. Although I was again the so-called "walking tape player," a guest seldom seeing the same classes twice, I was not bored. My head was full of the teaching theories and practices I was learning in the evenings, and I was doing homework between classes.

In total, I taught at the secondary level (junior

and senior high schools) for around six years. Then, having gotten my Masters of Education, I began teaching at the tertiary (university) level —first at Nanzan in Nagoya and finally at Ryukoku in Kyoto. Along the way, I got a PhD in Applied Linguistics from Victoria University of Wellington. My research focus became vocabulary learning, and I eventually wrote a book called *Japan's Built-in Lexicon of English-based Loanwords* (2007).

Importance of Motivation (and My Top Three List)

The noun *motivation* means a reason to do something. For example, "Money is often the motivation for work." But the verb *motivate* and adjective *motivated* are also important; they indicate a giving or having a desire to do something. For example: "I am highly motivated to climb that hill." Both meanings are complementary and differ only slightly. You could even put them in the same sentence: "Because my only motivation for studying English is passing tests, I feel no motivation at all."

Motivation, generally, can be classified based on its psychological origin. Some people are externally (or extrinsically) motivated, the source of motivation being something outside of the individual such as money, grades, or praise. Such students continue to study English simply to pass classes regardless of not liking English.

Unfortunately, being forced to do something makes us dislike the thing (and resent the forcers). In such a situation, the information and skills taught are not long remembered or mastered.

The opposite of external motivation is internal (intrinsic) motivation. Actions that result from internal motivation are driven by internal rewards such as satisfaction from the doing. Students with high internal motivation are excited to study English.

Internally motivated students are more likely to seek out opportunities for learning (for the sake of learning). For mastering English, this is usually the best and longest-lived motivation. Learners with internal motivation will gain increased satisfaction as their skills improve.

Both external and internal motivation exist in each of us to a degree, and both have value.

When forced to study something we consider irrelevant to our daily lives, the information will tend to bounce off our heads without entering. This is because our brains filter out the unimportant; smells, sounds, anything that our instincts have evolved to consider un-useful and un-threatening seldom rise to our awareness. Two birds sitting on an electric line are either unnoticed or quickly forgotten as their remembering (for days and years) would not only be useless but clutter our brains.

By contrast, imagine you are about to try wind surfing for the first time. Your mind is focused like a laser on the instructor. You glance with concern at the water; you are not the best swimmer. You have friends nearby who you would rather impress with your skill than laugh at your failure. You ask the instructor many questions and listen carefully to the responses. Your instinct is screaming "This is life or death!" although thanks to a life jacket it is not. You are *motivated* and will rapidly advance from knowing nothing to being a windsurfing veteran.

Motivation is key, and when asked by students how to master English, I reply by giving my "Top Three List." The best way to master English is to live in an English-speaking country. This is my "number one." Doing so maximizes your motivation. You will need English for shopping, for dentist visits, for negotiating with a landlord—everything. It is a "life or death" situation! Your innate ability, as a human, to learn a language, will be activated.

When I first arrived in Japan, my Japanese level was virtually zero. But a bitter experience

motivated me to master it. I was in the hallway of a junior high with some students and a JTE. I do not recall what we were talking about, but I tried to use Japanese. To my shock, one of the students asked the JTE, "What did he say?" And the teacher replied, "I don't know." Even with my poor ability, I understood. My face must have turned red with chagrin.

But on that day, a powerful motivation was born. For about a year, I strictly followed a schedule of studying my university Japanese textbook—from page one—for 30 minutes. Amazingly, I felt that I was seeing the pages for the first time. The need to communicate in Japan had given me new eyes. I made quick progress, and by the end of the year, I was able to hold a conversation—and keep it going—in Japanese. My new motivation made all the difference.

This story also highlights the importance of mistakes. It is often said that the Japanese avoid making mistakes out of fear of shame, which can be demotivating. However, mistakes are the only route to mastery. By "theory testing," we can check whether our understanding of something is correct. If it is not, we can change course and try again. And in that hallway, the humiliation I felt when failing to communicate motivated rather than demotivated me.

Moreover, I had come to Japan with "integral motivation." Some people describe this as the desire to "go native." I did not want to hang out with other foreigners or be limited to speaking only to bilingual Japanese. In fact, I wanted to become part of society and learn about Japan. To do so, I would have to master the language. I also hoped to meet my soul mate.

Indeed, number two on my Top Three List is to have a boyfriend or girlfriend who speaks English. Here, too, motivation to learn English will be high, regardless of where one lives. Birthdays and holidays, chats and fights, everything will need to be done in English. And not being able to communicate (with a partner who does not speak Japanese) is very stressful. Thus anyone, in this situation, would eagerly "hit the books" to learn English to fully express themselves.

Number three on my list is a weaker form of number two. Can you guess? It is having an English-speaking friend. Motivation will be somewhat lower, as the emotional aspect is not as strong. Also, the range of topics and emotions will be more limited; it is less likely, for instance, to have a heated argument with a mere friend.

It does not matter rather one's partner is a native speaker. The key is to use English, even if it is simply the common language. Such friends can be made in various ways. Some students volunteer as guides or at international events. Larger cities have numerous foreign students eager for Japanese pals.

Beyond my Top Three List, everything blends into what I consider to be "better than nothing." Other things that students can do in their free time to improve their English include: traditional activities like reading, watching movies, and listening to music; or modern, online activities like watching videos, information searches, and blogging. It does not really matter. All these offer comparable chances for *input* that allows us to encounter and review words.

Unfortunately, in these activities, the opportunities for *output*—language being assembled by us—are limited. Also, because of the distance between us and our communication partner, it is a low-risk, low-need situation that naturally does less to raise motivation.

I often use the example of learning to play piano. We can study about it in books or videos for years and still have little ability to play. To master piano, we need to touch the keyboard, make notes, and—yes—mistakes. In the same way, my Top Three List gives us the urgent need to "play the piano" by real interaction with

real native speakers. We will be "playing simple tunes" within weeks or months, and "playing long compositions" after half a year or so.

Then what is the best way to teach English? I do not have a convenient Top Three answer but let me tell you about my recent experiences of being stuck "Down Under" for some insights.

A Kiwi Lockdown

In January of 2020, I travelled to New Zealand to use the facilities at Wellington University. This was very early in the Covid crisis. When I arrived at Auckland Airport, the only precaution was for Covid-related brochures to be handed out to arriving passengers. However, within a few weeks, the entire country entered a strict lockdown, and it became impossible for me to return to Japan.

Fortunately for me, classes became online, but in a short period, teachers had to prepare. I was in a pinch. I had been happy with my face-to-face classes, and I wanted to have great online classes.

The first hurdle was to master an online meeting platform. As I am supervising some of the non-Japanese, part-time teachers, I also had to make sure they mastered it, too. I organized online workshops with these part-timers to compare notes and try out the platform's features, such as the one that allows the teacher to create discussion groups.

Everything went well for the part-timers except one; he did not even own a computer. Some other teachers and students also lacked the necessary gear. Fortunately, my university created a system to lend such people the necessary equipment such as modems.

The second hurdle was to *reorganize* my classes to be conducted online. For instance, classes that had relied on printed handouts would have to transition to downloadable files. And rather than using a blackboard, slides would need to be prepared. I really was at a loss at how to approach online classes.

At the time, I was watching many online videos about the Covid crisis. One of these content makers always used a presentation program that I had used at conferences. This well-known software allows the presenter to create slides and even show video or play audio. "That's it!" I thought.

I decided to plan, organize, and ultimately conduct my classes through this presentation program via the meeting platform. When necessary, I would end the "share" and interact with my students face-to-face (in an online sense). At other times, I would show videos, show pages from the actual reading homework, or have the students do small groupwork, which was a chance for them to interact.

Over time, the importance of those small-group activities became clear. In 2020, freshman almost never had a chance to meet and make friends at university. Therefore, those few minutes where students were speaking with one another in small groups online was often their only chance to socialize. Not only was their motivation vis-à-vis English in jeopardy, there was a danger of them dropping out of school entirely.

I felt sorry for my unlucky freshmen and organized voluntary, fun classes during the summer. During Japan's lockdown, I was really worried about my students' emotional state. With all the calamities in the world, it was crucial for everyone to avoid feeling alone. These classes were important to me as well.

I encouraged my students—but did not force them—to show their faces. This allowed me to feel that I was communicating with real humans. And, naturally, it allowed them to socialize more directly with their classmates.

The second "huge hurdle" of reorganizing classes to be online has resulted in permanent changes in my current face-to-face classes. I continue to prepare and present my classes us-

ing that presentation program. And rather than going through the online meeting platform, I connect my computer to a large TV monitor. Students find viewing the large monitor more interesting than looking at me or the handouts. And I can incorporate more audio and video in my teaching than ever before. In the past, I would follow notes in a notebook; I have not used notes in years. I have also reduced the chalk dust I breathe.

Staying Motivated in the Future

That motivation is fundamental to learning has far-reaching implications. Let us consider standardized tests, autonomous learning, correcting errors, and artificial intelligence.

Standardized Testing

One implication of motivation's importance is for standardized testing when used for curriculum evaluation. Such tests aim to measure student gains in overall ability, which heavily relies on listening, reading, writing, and speaking, which in turn rely on mastery of grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, etc.

Notably, these skills have developed over many years. So measuring overall progress by giving pre- and post-tests over short spans will not give meaningful results. For instance, it is doubtful that three months of twice-a-week classes (plus homework) can produce measurable progress. Any positive results are, therefore, dubious. The predictable rise in test scores is largely a result of the "testing phenomenon": students becoming accustomed to the test, itself.

Individual results seen by students can certainly be motivating. "I'm doing so well!" they might think. However, such data used collectively by universities to justify the effectiveness of their curriculums is a deception, whether intentional or not. Giving tests, itself, looks good, and good results look even better.

To me, it is far more meaningful to simply ask students, after a given class or curriculum, whether they are more motivated to study English or not. The main goal of my classes is to strengthen students' motivation to learn English. Our time with students is limited. But if we have encouraged them to spend more future time engaged with English and to become internationally minded, we have really made a difference.

Autonomous Learning

Many universities are encouraging students to study on their own. This is called *autonomous learning,* meaning that learners take an active role in their education, seeking out learning opportunities outside of class. This approach acknowledges that true learning requires the active engagement of the learner.

An approach is for a class to use two textbooks: one for study outside (with only testing done in class), and a classroom textbook (with homework). This is the system at my university for freshmen, and the teachers are supposed to encourage their students' autonomous learning.

Unfortunately, this autonomous learner strategy does not seem to be clearly explained to freshmen, and it is forgotten in sophomore, junior, and senior classes. Take this example told to me by a part-time teacher. Juniors and seniors had responded to a questionnaire that, most of all, they wanted to improve their communication skills. Despite this, in class, they were passive and never raised their hands. Clearly, the message given to freshmen—that they must take responsibility for their learning and actively seek opportunities—had already been forgotten.

Thus the autonomous learning approach must be overtly applied, with repeated explanation, to *all* classes, up until graduation. This may be easier said than done in large schools with many teachers. But it is a worthy goal if we want our students to achieve all they can.

Error Correction

Above, I recalled the story of how my motivation to study was strengthened by a failure to communicate. Our Japanese students often fear failure, so we must emphasize that errors are a good and necessary thing.

Whenever a student errs, we should be very gentle and encouraging with our correction. Whether they succeed or fail, learners' having bravely tried should be praised.

Some JTEs fear being corrected by their ALTs. For them, the best approach might be preemptive. Early on, let students know that you, like them, are learning English and that it is a never-ending process. Tell students, from time to time, you will make a mistake and are happy to be corrected. By stating this, not only will you soften the embarrassment that may come, you are showing students a good model of a language learner.

Artificial Intelligence

Today's "Gen Z" learners have always been surrounded by digital technology. Therefore, teachers will have to adopt new technologies in their English classes, and there are many advantages to doing so. However, digital technology and artificial intelligence pose various dangers. The threats to privacy are well known.

We will also have to fight to maintain the "ghost in the machine": the human spirit. Robots taking over our classes would lead our society to dark places where compassion and humor might be lacking. There will always be the need for human teachers who, for instance, are willing to laugh at their own bad jokes.

Conclusion

In the past, it could be argued that English was unnecessary in Japan. But times have changed. Today, English is a life skill such as being able to cook, drive, or take care of a baby. English enhances life—making it richer and more rewarding. If we can convey this message to our students, then we can make greater gains in English education.

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