Teachers’ Influence on Student Motivation in the Language Classroom

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Abstract. Motivation plays an important role in the students’ learning process and it could be provoked by the teacher at the same time. It is accepted that intrinsic motivation and extrinsic motivation are distinguished. This paper attempts to argue that teachers could largely influence student motivation in the classroom considering the context of Chinese universities. Teachers could enhance the quality of the language classes and demonstrate teachers’ art to provoke students’ extrinsic motivation as well as facilitate the students’ intrinsic motivation. At the same time, teachers are recommended to distinguish between internal sources and externals sources of student motivation and take measures according to the specific circumstance.

Introduction

Motivation is an intangible asset of the student to promote the language learning but it could be provoked by the teacher at the same time. It is complicated since it is changeable and it varies from stages to stages in the learning process [1]. In this paper, motivation refers to the ‘cognitive arousal’ leading to the decision to achieve an established goal and make continuous physical or intellectual efforts for it [2]. As for in the language classroom, student motivation indicates the willingness of participating in the learning process, the reasons for the actions and the attention and efforts he or she devotes to the learning. It is widely acknowledged that intrinsic motivation and extrinsic motivation are distinguished due to the different origins which are from inside and from outside [3]. Some would argue that intrinsic motivation is more important and more effective than the extrinsic motivation so the teacher could do little to change the student motivation, however, there remains considerable ambiguity and potential conflict in what the teacher could do. Thus, this paper attempts to argue that teachers could largely influence student motivation in the classroom considering the context of Chinese universities.

In order to demonstrate this, this essay will focus on the teachers’ efforts and influences on student motivation and focus on the Chinese universities language classroom as well. First, it will be shown that even though the intrinsic motivation comes from within the student himself or herself, the teacher could still emphasize the connection between learning and student interests and encourage the student to do what he or she wants to do. Then, what the teacher could do to provoke the extrinsic motivation will be demonstrated from the perspective of enhancing the quality of the lesson. Last but not least, other things the teacher could do, also called teachers’ art, such as creating school environment, establishing learning community, building teacher-student rapport, will be discussed.

Solutions for Teachers to Stimulate Students’ Intrinsic Motivation

Intrinsic Motivation Comes from inside the Individual Student

One of the most common beliefs about intrinsic motivation is that it comes from inside the individual student, referring to that the students could be motivated when they find the learning process enjoyable and they have the strong willingness to make themselves better. It is also widely believed that intrinsic motivation could sustain longer in the language learning process [4]. It has been pointed out by a research done among Chinese students that intrinsic interesting in learning has a close relationship with the productive and addictive changes, which shows the interaction
between the intrinsic interest in target language and culture and learning language to improve self-identity. Thus, the teacher should pay adequate attention to not only the language, the linguistic outcomes of the learning, but also the non-linguistic outcomes, the self-identity of the students. At the same time, the intrinsic motivation of the students could be cultivated by building up the native language and culture and the target language and culture synchronously. In her discussion of motivation, Gao (2007) concludes that students are willing to fulfill their self-esteem needs and therefore teachers could provide instructions for their long-term individual development motivation. Such instructions are highly in demand in Chinese universities since the students are under huge pressure of finding a good job or continuing getting higher degrees, where guidance of long-term individual development motivation is needed. Hence, teachers could contribute a lot to provoking students’ intrinsic motivation in the classroom.

**Barriers for Teachers to Help Build Students’ Intrinsic Motivation**

However, it has been claimed that if the curriculum fits for the students’ interests and ability and the teacher use appropriate method and design enjoyable classroom activities, students will have motivation naturally. It has also been argued that little can be done to change the learners’ natural aptitude towards language learning. In addition, according to Maslow’s hierarchy for human needs theory, physical needs, safety needs and love needs are fundamental, with esteem needs and needs for self-actualization being the upper needs, which indicates that if the students come to the classroom with hunger and thirst, they would definitely not motivated by the teachers in any way. Likewise, it is not expected to happen that students who reject the class or feel uncomfortable for the class would take active parts in the learning activities, not mention overcoming the difficulties in the language learning or being creative in the classroom working. Furthermore, it has been put forward that there are several difficulties for students to maintain intrinsic motivation and for teachers to help promote. In China, the English classes are compulsory in universities and the syllabus are designed by the education department instead of giving opportunities for students to choose what they want while the class size is usually 50-60, which limits the teacher to meet the demand of the individual student. These situations above may be barriers for teaches to help build students’ intrinsic motivation.

**Solutions for Teachers to Stimulate Students’ Intrinsic Motivation to Learn**

Indeed, there remain some solutions for teachers to stimulate students’ intrinsic motivation to learn. It has been suggested that teachers could act as a model chasing intrinsic motivation for language learning and teaching since most of the English teachers in Chinese universities are Chinese and they themselves are English language learners. Moreover, the teacher could care more about the students and make the classroom a safe place for their study to ensure their physical needs, safety needs and love needs. It is noteworthy that teachers could still emphasize the content and activities which the students tend to involve actively based on the syllabus while some exercise opportunities could be provided for the students to make the decision. Similarly, teachers’ proper guide and support may make students satisfied with their autonomy, competence and relatedness needs. In these respects, teachers could play a significant role in helping students to pursue their intrinsic motivation.

**Teachers Could Make Efforts in Diverse Ways to Influence the Student Extrinsic Motivation**

Extrinsic Motivation Pertains to Outside Factors

Extrinsic motivation will almost certainly be ideal but it is more realistic to take extrinsic motivation into consideration. Extrinsic motivation pertains to outside factors, including the future possibility of travelling abroad, the need to take part in examinations and the social expectation. When it comes to the extrinsic motivation, teachers could have large influences in the language classroom, especially from the aspect of improving the quality of the lessons. It could be persuasively argued that the students could be motivated by ‘an interesting course’ in China since
the students have a great quantity of sessions to attend and the ‘interesting’ ones could attract students’ attention successfully. A teacher who is qualified enough to make the lesson ‘interesting’ is suggested to be a model for the language use and have adequate teaching technicians to promote the students’ understanding of the language, develop students’ language skills and language abilities and stimulate their participation in the classroom activities [8]. Additionally, it has been proposed that teachers are supposed to pay constant attention to the classroom activities in order to recognize the ones students respond well and actively engaged. Meanwhile, the principles of designing and implementing language activities have been put forward as goal relevance, proper difficulty level, feasibility and cost effectiveness. Within these four principles, goal relevance, proper difficulty level and cost effectiveness are not beyond comprehension, with feasibility pertaining to the space, time, facilities and type of students for the activities. In addition, with the rapid development of the economy and technology, the usage of the multimedia and the new media will be a good method to arouse the students interest in the class. The students’ learning resources may have turned from learning only from the paper works to the computer and mobile phone resources [9]. Knowing this could help teachers have more access to build up content that could provoke students’ motivation. E-learning systems could also be set up in universities to assist the teachers’ work [10]. Hence, if we accept that high quality lessons could be helpful with learning motivation, then we may accept that teachers could largely influence student motivation in the classroom.

Teacher May Have Negative Influences on Student Motivation?

Nevertheless, teacher as a kind of external sources of motivation has been asserted to be useless or have negative influences on student motivation. The behavior reinforcement theories present that motivation is rooted in the learners’ subjective experience, such as their goals, needs and their thoughts about motivation and therefore; the reinforced could be a failure when the learners despise the value of it. Similarly, the attribution theory states that the task availability of motivating the students depends on the learners’ belief about why the learning outcomes occur. In a word, if the students believe that success in learning language attributes only to having a good teacher, the tasks will not be motivating if they do not consider the teacher is a good one. From another respect, the goal of learning could be a strong external source of motivation; however, students in Chinese universities may be lack of clear goals of learning English other than passing the exams. Based on this situation, some teachers present the teaching materials with the warning that they would appear in the exams to provoke student motivation, which is claimed to have neglected the purposes of testing [11]. Such discussions have shown the drawbacks of teacher influence on student motivation.

Guide Students to Have Clear Goals and Use Tests Properly

In fact, the teachers could guide students to have clear goals and use tests properly to guarantee the quality of the lessons and motivate the students. The crux of the matter is that the teachers should make it clear for the class and the individuals of the goals and the expected learning outcomes. In the meantime, the goals should be challenging but attainable so that the students could have real sense of success and motivation in a long period. Ideas about monitoring the learning process and giving feedback have been advanced [12]. As for the testing, the problem appears to be that Chinese university students have CET-4 and CET-6 tests and it has been recommended that teacher could use tests as real teaching tool to show the relationship between the underlying goal of achieving language proficiency and the short-term goal of getting an excellent score in the exams. Another important point is that students care about their academic achievement so teachers may help them reach their goals step by step [13]. Basically, teachers have influences on student motivation in various ways.

Teachers’ Art Contributes to Student Motivation to a Large Extent

When it comes to the language classroom, it crystallized around the belief that the teachers’ art
has possibly made contribution to student motivation to a large extent. It needs to be acknowledged that an ideal teacher for motivating the students is expected to have several personal characteristics like understanding, having sympathy for the students and willing to help the students deal with current problems and release their pressure. As it turned out, the teachers are supposed to be psychologists, caring about the students and being confident and sympathetic in the teacher-student relationship. Simultaneously, teachers could help students build their confidence, which could be realized by building teacher-student rapport. According to Harmer (2007), students have identified to stay motivated for a longer period if they could feel the care from the teacher, especially in the Chinese universities classrooms, where 50-60 students study together and expect the attention and care from the teachers. In addition, it has been raised that remembering the students’ name, interests, ability and even some experiences would improve the teacher-student relationship. In short, humanistic approaches like personalizing the lessons could be ideal methods [14]. Thus, the knowledge above may facilitate teachers to be more effective in motivating students in classroom.

**Difficulties in Applying Teachers’ Art**

However, it has been claimed that teachers are not the only external resources of student motivation and there are some difficulties in applying teachers’ art. Initially, not only the teachers but also parents, peer students and the society students live in could be motivating. Simultaneously, it has been pointed out that hardly can the social-linguist context factor of student motivation be changed. In Chinese universities, the fierce competition among peer students could obviously be motivating. As for the negative perceptions of teacher motivation strategies, some of the strategies have been criticized to be too controlling for the students to develop their learning autonomy [15]. On the other hand, some characteristics of students, including shyness and lack of communicative skills prevent the teacher-student relationship from ameliorating. These factors of teachers’ art could be taken into consideration.

**External Source Could Be Abundant for the Student Motivation**

Nevertheless, with the background of globalization, the social power tends to support high quality education in English in China and teacher is the direct source for the students’ education and therefore teachers are expected to motivate the students with appropriate methods. It is obvious that the economics of China is developing rapidly, which enhance the possibility of international business and travelling and the need for English is in the tendency of increasing. Thus, the external source could be abundant for the student motivation. As for the motivating strategies, it is suggested that teachers could use those ones which match students’ value and the ones students feel comfortable with. Meanwhile, by communicating with the students about the expectation of the strategies, predicting and replying the problems students encounter with, teachers can help students adjust themselves to the motivating strategies in accordance with individual needs and interests. One of the efficient strategies is establishing learning community where students connect with their group members positively, work collaboratively and get emotional support from each other. The responsibility for the teachers is to create learning environment, emphasize their collaborative goals and individual goals, provide information and assistance timely and ‘be an authoritative manager and socializer of students’. Another external resource could be the developing educational system and the technology, which could be used by the teachers, the parents and the students at the same time [16]. Hence, it may be concluded that the teachers could make efforts in diverse ways to influence the student motivation in classroom.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, the teachers play a core role in motivating the students in language classroom in
Chinese universities even though it is difficult. Teachers enhance the quality of the language lessons and demonstrate teachers’ art to provoke students’ extrinsic motivation as well as facilitate the students’ intrinsic motivation. At the same time, teachers are recommended to distinguish between internal sources and externals sources of student motivation and take measures according to the specific circumstance. Therefore, teachers can influence student motivation in the classroom to a large extent. Still, efforts are needed for the teachers and the motivation researchers to explore more effective and realistic ways to help the students build the motivation to learn.

References