Intrinsic versus extrinsic motivation in an EFL content-based class

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Abstract

Content-based courses are used to teach ESL and EFL students as the course material itself is thought to interest students which will then activate intrinsic motivation for language learning. However, not all subjects innately appeal to students. In this paper various activities were used to teach a range of introductory topics in a content-based life science course, and the activities were evaluated through a student survey to determine which interested students most. Two students identified as being exceptional or highly intrinsically motivated and two less exceptional students then took semi-structured interviews. The interviewed exceptional students seemed to take pleasure in a wide range of class activities especially those, which challenged them to explore new concepts. Interviewed less exceptional students enjoyed more passive visual activities and a hands-on activity that had well defined quickly achieved solutions, and also were some what motivated by their peers.

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1. Introduction
Content-based (CB) courses were first used for teaching ESL students in a more authentic learning environment as an alternative to the standard contrived language learning classroom environment (Short, 1993); the content of the course itself motivates students (Chamot & O'Mally, 1994). This is easy to imagine based on the often-tedious content of language texts. EFL students were subsequently taught using CB courses, which are now an accepted method of language acquisition (Davies, 2003).

Motivation is an active research area that is now in the public eye for motivation can be strengthened in order to obtain desired goals and be the difference between ordinary and successful people (Deci, Vallerand, Pelletier, & Ryan, 1991; Moskowitz & Grant, 2009). Teachers continually fine-tune their methods in order to better motivate or engage their students. However, not all students have the same levels of self-efficacy. Some students seem to be intrinsically motivated or self-regulated when it comes to course work while others are ill equipped to reach or even attempt to reach academic goals (Ames & Archer, 1988; Bandura & Schunk, 1981; Zimmerman & Martinez-Pons, 1988).

Intrinsically motivated students make teaching easy and rewarding. On the other end of the spectrum, students with very little intrinsic motivation require more of a teacher. Yet, one of the challenges in teaching is to help uninterested students gain interest, through CB courses in the case of EFL students, as well as self-efficacy (Bandura & Schunk, 1981).

2. Problem Statement
Almost all students in Life Science class state that they have no interest in science, which negates the main benefit of teaching a CB course in the first place. How can such students be motivated in such a class?

3. Research Questions
What methodologies are most effective for stimulating learning in a course that students are not interested in, and how will students' motivational levels influence which methods are successful?

4. Purpose of the Study
This study aims to determine which methods best engage EFL students in a course (Life Science) that does not intrinsically interest them and how students' motivational levels influence their views of the various methods.

5. Research Methods
A qualitative study of Life Science students was done through anonymous questionnaires to evaluate various activities done during the course. Students were asked to give the activity a grade from one to ten based on how interesting the activity was for them. Here are some examples of activities done during the course: 1) in small groups students tried to define the characteristics of a living organism; 2) in small groups students tried to write possible conclusions from a simple experiment; 3) in small groups students read their short compositions; 4) in small groups students built molecules with molecular models; 5) watched various videos, animations, and power point presentations; 6) watched the teacher give brief explanations of the
history of kanji related to the day's topic; 7) did text-based reading assignments; and 8) took a vocabulary test.

Students were assigned to one of three groups: E) exceptional self-motivation; A) average self-motivation; and L) less exceptional self-motivation where exceptional self-motivation is equivalent to a high level of intrinsic motivation. The course instructor chose 13 students and assigned four, five, and four students respectively to the E, A, and L groups. Three other teachers who were familiar with the 13 students also grouped the students. There was near complete agreement for the E and L groups. Two students each from the E and L groups were interviewed. All four teachers placed all the four students interviewed into the same groups.

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Students were shown the questionnaire and asked to discuss each activity listed. Interviews proceeded from there in a semi-structured manner trying to get more details about why an activity was enjoyable or not. The interviewer sometimes offered possible explanations for the students to consider. Interviews lasted about 20 minutes each; both English and Japanese were used.

6. Findings
Exceptional students said they enjoyed most everything in the course, but especially material which challenged them to explore new concepts. They even claimed to enjoy studying for the vocabulary quiz, and they earnestly did their text assignments. They also retained the material and were happy to ask more questions about Life Science during the interviews as well as outside of class. Both said that they found even the most loathed topic chemistry to be somewhat interesting and were happy to talk about chemistry.

The less exceptional students enjoyed watching videos, but did admit that they were more tuned out than actually learning the material. They also enjoyed the hands-on molecular model building. They did not enjoy reading their short compositions aloud in the small groups, but did say that they after the initial group-reading, they put a little more effort into subsequent compositions knowing they would have to read them out loud in front of their peers.

Students who had the most total homework and quiz points would have to do very few questions on the take-home test. Another form of extrinsic motivation was simply to get credit for the course. Students who failed the course would have a heavier course load the next semester. The extrinsic motivation was not very effective for the two group L students. They measured success as just passing with the least effort.

Conclusions
EFL students' overall academic discipline or motivation seem stop lay a positive role in what kinds of teaching methods will stimulate them. Almost independent of the teaching method, exceptional, or highly intrinsically motivated, students could generate interest for a subject they initially disliked.

Both of the interviewed exceptional students chose to work, not to transfer for further study, after graduating. This means that good grades were of little value to them, as their grades would not be a factor in finding employment. They both knew they could pass the course with much less effort.
The two less exceptional students interviewed seemed not to be avoiding failure; rather, they were not concerned about success at all. They were indicative of a system that discourages schools from failing many students so they were confident they could graduate with little effort.

This study would yield more useful data if the questionnaires were done each class, not done anonymously, many more students were interviewed, and all students were assigned a group. Less exceptional students might gain confidence through achievement if each class included some activities with rather quickly reached solutions like the molecular model building.

7. References


