

An article discussing ways of helping students overcome difficulties in learning English could initially attempt to focus on specific areas such as pronunciation, grammar, or vocabulary usage. However, to do that justice, a whole chapter or book would be required. Instead, this article takes a broader and more simple focus by looking at three general aspects of language learning that are not only important for all learners but particularly crucial for those struggling with the challenges language learning presents. Often, the underlying causes of many of the difficulties students face in learning a second language stem from at least three factors; anxiety, motivation, and learning strategies.



## Anxiety

Language learners, in some cases, may have an inbuilt predisposition to feeling anxious, or they may be the type of person who only has anxiety in certain situations. For many students, a language class is a particular context that induces anxious feelings. This is because language learning can put them in situations where their 'language-ego' is threatened. This threat can manifest in many ways such as when they feel they are in competition with other learners. Whatever the cause of the anxiety, there seems to be a link between higher levels of anxiety and lower achievement in language learning. However, it is important to consider, just as it is in the case of motivation, whether anxiety is the cause of poor achievement or its direct result. From studies in the field, it appears that both are valid assumptions. It can be the case that a learner with a high aptitude for learning languages and a record of success can experience anxiety after an unexpected failure. But as is the case for many learners, their own general anxiety and the situational anxiety can have a seriously detrimental effect on their learning. Anxiety can have both positive and negative elements. There is a positive anxiety, similar to a feeling of euphoria, that students might feel as a result of the opportunity that learning a new language offers to reimagine themselves in a new and positive way. Negative anxiety might also be a result of a disconnect in the student's mind between the pedagogical approach in the classroom and their own beliefs about language learning. Thus, it may make sense to conclude that teachers should not only be looking at ways to minimize negative anxiety but also seeking ways to promote positive forms of anxiety.

Anxiety can happen at three stages of the language learning process, and in each stage, anxiety can have a negative impact on learning. In the input stage, learners experience anxiety because they are struggling to understand unfamiliar language or concepts. In the processing stage, stress comes from trying to memorize and identify patterns in new input. In the output stage, anxiety stems from trying to retrieve and use previously learnt language.

As teachers, we can have an impact on learner anxiety through the pedagogical and classroom management choices we make, but we should not be looking to minimize anxiety in all cases. As mentioned previously, anxiety can be beneficial, so it is important to try and promote the correct type and appropriate level of anxiety.

Here are some ways that you can minimize negative anxiety. Do not place too much emphasis on error correction as this can reinforce in the students' minds the things they cannot do while not encouraging them to acknowledge what they have achieved and can do. Instead, it may be helpful to provide models of correct language usage. This also encourages students to self-monitor their language use and make comparisons and adjustments. With more challenging tasks, take a scaffolded approach and break the task into smaller and more manageable parts that build upon each other. At each stage, you can pause and review to provide assistance so

that students feel confident in tackling the next stage. Make it clear to students from the outset that making fun of peers and laughing at errors is not accepted behaviour. Make the classroom a collaborative and supportive environment by creating opportunities for students to reflect on their learning and share their challenges. Try to find ways for stronger students to support weaker students. This may require passing on some basic teaching strategies, but it will contribute to a collaborative and supportive learning environment. Take time to impart and model learning strategies in class as these will equip students with practical tools to take on more challenging tasks. Consistently encourage students to take risks while reminding them that your classroom is a safe place to learn. Help them see that mistakes are welcome as they present an opportunity to reflect and review. Finally, work with students to help them set individual goals and when goals are achieved, use this as an opportunity to acknowledge and celebrate success.

## **Motivation**

Of all the factors that lead to successful language learning, motivation is one of the most crucial. For teachers to be effective in helping their students acquire a new language, they must understand the role that motivation plays in that acquisition.

Motivation can be defined in many ways, but a simple way to look at it is to see it as the reason why people decide to do what they do, why they are or not able to sustain the required effort, and why they are willing to put in the level of effort they do. Motivation can also be seen as a 'passion' for doing something. For learners to succeed, they require a certain level of 'passion', and it is a teacher's role to help them find ways to connect to that passion.

When looking at how you might be able to help students develop an appropriate level of motivation, three principles should be kept in mind. Firstly, avoid simplifying motivation as purely a system of rewards and punishments. Instead, try to motivate students by making your lessons more interesting and engaging and helping students become more autonomous learners. Secondly, do not assume that once motivation has been established that it will last automatically. It is human nature that we can lose sight of a goal or become fatigued in its pursuit, which can lead us to be distracted by other interests. Therefore, maintaining motivation is a must. Finally, in deciding on particular motivational strategies, always choose quality over quantity. Look for a few simple, effective, and easy-to-maintain strategies that suit your teaching style and your students' learning styles.

Several strategies can be used to positively influence individual student motivation.

The first is to ignite students' interest in language learning and the course they are enrolled in. This may involve selling them on what they can realistically expect to gain from the experience – the satisfaction gained from mastering a second language or the future opportunities it can unlock. Try to connect language learning to interests that students already have. For instance, you may learn that some students have an interest in performance arts, so show them how language learning can involve role-plays and music. Make it clear that language learning is not about rote learning vocabulary and grammar rules, but more about a wide variety of learning activities such as communicative tasks and games.

Raise students' level of expected success. It is no revelation that people's motivation declines in situations where they might expect to fail. Therefore, it is important to set tasks that students can realistically expect to achieve. Likewise, it is difficult to stimulate and maintain motivation when tasks present no real challenge. According to the theory of optimal arousal, students are generally more motivated when they are required to perform tasks or engage in activities that provide them with challenges that are appropriate for their abilities, i.e., these tasks are neither

too difficult nor too easy. When arousal levels are too high, such as being too anxious or stressed by an or stressed by an overwhelming challenge, students may give up and resort to a less stressful activity like texting on their phones. If an activity is easy and students' arousal level is low, they can become bored and engage in activities that will increase their arousal level such as acting out in class. Therefore, to maintain a healthy expectation of success among students it is necessary to consistently provide activities that give them some sense of accomplishment. It also helps to make the criteria that determine success clear, give sufficient preparation time, and remind students that ongoing support is always available.

Most of us have had the experience of being in class and thinking, "Whenever am I going to need to know this in real life?" Not seeing any personal relevance in what they are doing is another way motivation wanes in students. Therefore, take the time to know what interests students and what their particular goals are and try to link these as much as possible to what is happening in class.

Predictability and monotony are two effective motivation killers. Think about various aspects of the learning process and try to mix them up as much as you can. During each lesson try to vary the focus, types of tasks, learner interaction patterns, and teaching materials.

Not only should your learning tasks be varied but inherently interesting. As previously mentioned, they should be suitably challenging and could also include elements such as personal interest, humour, or novelty.

Self-confidence and motivation usually go hand in hand. Confident learners show a willingness to communicate regardless of the amount of the second language they have acquired. To help students build self-confidence, provide consistent encouragement highlighting their efforts and achievements, and try to minimize their language anxiety. When students feel they can maintain face, they are more engaged and motivated to participate. Continually reinforcing that mistakes are a natural and even welcome part of the learning process should help students feel more comfortable in class. Similarly, avoid putting students in situations where they feel their social image might be threatened. For activities that require free and unscripted speech, rather than having students perform in front of the whole class, consider having them perform in smaller groups in which every member is also required to perform.

Help students become more independent learners. Students who have a sense of ownership in their learning tend to be more motivated. Ownership can be developed by giving students as much of a say in what they do in class as is beneficial to do so. For certain activities, it may be appropriate for students to take on a leadership or teaching role.

Positive reinforcement is a way that teachers can increase learner satisfaction, which in turn, can result in increased motivation. For whatever reason, it is not uncommon for teachers to focus more attention on what students are not doing well and consistently articulating this back to them, rather than giving equal or even more attention to successes and celebrating them with the students. Making it clear to students that you recognize their abilities and achievements helps validate in their own minds the effort they have expended, builds faith in you as a teacher and the course, and adds to the overall tone of a positive learning environment.

The way feedback and assessment are provided can also have an impact on student motivation. When it comes to assessment, it pays to make it as transparent as possible so that learners are clear on the criteria that constitute success. This helps them develop a roadmap for achieving the criteria, and if they can see that they are fair and valid criteria that are clearly linked to the taught syllabus, they can be more motivated in class. Assessment should also make room to acknowledge effort and progress and not just be a measure of their current level of proficiency.

Provide periodic formative assessment throughout the course to help students track their progress and provide opportunities for feedback. With feedback, allow students to ask questions and make feedback constructive, which does not mean avoiding weak areas and only focusing on the positive. For areas that need improvement, provide clear and easy-to-understand explanations with examples followed by helpful tips to address particular issues. Finally, offer opportunities for peer and self-assessment. This will help promote students' understanding of their learning and provides opportunities for critical analysis of their own efforts encouraging them to become more autonomous learners.

## **Learning Strategies**

Research shows a positive correlation between strategies that students employ in their learning and their level of success in language acquisition. Successful learners apply strategies that are characterized by an active approach to learning. For instance, they may recite silently in their heads what the teacher says, they may think out an answer in their heads to a question posed to another student, they might closely examine the meaning of the language they are practising, or may actively seek opportunities to use the language outside the classroom either in a passive or active form.

Active learning strategies can be classified in four ways. Firstly, meta-cognitive strategies might include planning a study schedule or reflecting on the success or failure of certain study habits. Cognitive strategies involve techniques such as ways of memorizing vocabulary or using context clues to guess the meaning of words while reading. Affective strategies are characterized by how learners deal with issues such as a lack of motivation or frustration with a perceived lack of progress. Social strategies include the ways students cooperate with other learners or ask questions. For a teacher, it is important to develop some awareness of which particular strategies are more likely to lead to successful language learning and attempt to pass these on to learners who are experiencing difficulties. However, this is not a straightforward process as the specific strategies that work well with one student may not apply to another.

## **Conclusion**

While the ways in which students can have difficulty in learning English are numerous, as a starting point to help your students cope with these challenges, this article has briefly considered three broad but universally relevant areas that affect learners' ability to succeed. Anxiety, motivation, and learner strategies are all well covered in the academic literature, and it is hoped that this article has sparked an interest in further exploration of the topics covered.