5 Quick Tips for Motivating Your Students

by Michael Berman

Whether we like it or not, we teachers are in the business of motivating our students. In fact, the motivation level of our students is often what most determines their success in and enjoyment of our classes. Of course, students are individuals, so their given motivational triggers are necessarily diverse and often exasperatingly inconsistent. That said, I have found a number of practices which are supported by research and that tend to promote motivated work on a consistent basis.

1. **Ask Students to Commit**. Robert B. Cialdini, in his excellent book *Influence: The Psychology of Persuasion*, explains that most people are powerfully compelled to remain loyal to their commitments. In education – and in our ESL classes more specifically – this can play out in a number of ways. For example, if you directly ask your students to commit to coming prepared to each class and you explicitly acknowledge your students' commitments, they will be far more apt to complete their assignments than if you had not asked for their commitment.

    If you want to raise the success rate even higher, include a "because" clause in your solicitation: I am asking you to commit to coming prepared to every class *because* it is crucial to your success and to our making the best and most enjoyable use of our class time." Furthermore, once students see that the other students are coming prepared to class, this triggers another powerful motivator – that of "social proof" – which, in this case, reinforces and perpetuates students' drive to complete the required tasks.

    Finally, for students who are at risk of failure or who otherwise need to put forth extraordinary effort to pass, I sometimes outline in writing what is expected and have them literally sign their names to this commitment. Dr. Joe Dispenza, a health researcher and journalist, explains in a recent article that clear written commitments, especially when reviewed periodically, actually alter brain chemistry and help people achieve their goals. Though this contract-style intervention may not be appropriate for every case, it has usually worked well when I have employed it and is in my tool box when I need it.

2. **Make it Real**. This idea builds off of the notion of "social proof." Show your students that the language content you have been teaching them is anchored in common and widely respected usage. For example, bring in current newspaper articles (not articles you've saved from 5 years ago!) which show the language structures you are teaching. You can also use video, product labels, websites, internet-based corpus tools, etc. Language from these sources can serve to "certify" in students' minds that what they are learning is authentic, relevant and important.

3. **Create an Environment of Predictability**. Unpredictability = stress and avoidance. Robert Sapolsky, perhaps the most renowned stress physiologist of our time, has written much of this destructive

stress factor. In order to avoid its consequences in our classrooms, it is essential to create clear expectations and a consistent rhythm in your teaching. I generally avoid pop quizzes, for example. Instead, I pepper the semester with frequent (announced) mini-quizzes to keep students on track. I also try to manage my class sessions in a consistent, predictable manner. Finally, I provide grading rubrics in advance of the assignment and generally try to grade as transparently as possible.

4. **Manage Your Feedback to Students**. Speaking of grading… It is important to focus on only a handful of language issues when providing student feedback, especially when working with a struggling student. If we cover a student's paper with a sea of red chicken scratch, that student may become overwhelmed, confused and/or disillusioned. Sapolsky notes that stress is triggered when one feels like his or her situation is worsening, regardless of the actual reality of the situation. To many students, a paper full of red ink means the academic sky is falling. Of course, sometimes the sky really *is* falling. However, even in those cases, it is still more productive to focus on two or three key areas so that the task comes across as more defined, manageable and realistic. Author's confession: I type these words knowing that I myself have often fallen woefully short with this best practice. It has often been difficult for me to not "sweat the small stuff," yet I know that my thoroughness has been counterproductive for many of my students. I need to remember that I am their language teacher, not their editor. I'm getting better, but I'm not there yet.

5. **Make an Effort to Connect with your Students**. You have seen it before: an instructor that perhaps strikes you as competent but pedagogically ordinary has legions of student followers that sing his or her praises up and down the halls and all over the internet. In many of these cases, I believe, it is because that teacher has understood that when a student "likes" a teacher, that student is more apt to be a motivated and satisfied participant in the class. Indeed, the power of "likability" is well documented. Cialdini notes that people are far more likely to commit themselves if they perceive commonality between themselves and the person who is seeking the commitment. In addition, people who perceive that they have received a gesture of respect or admiration (a compliment, for example) are more likely to commit.

   To be clear, in our world of higher ed ESL instruction, being likable does not mean being their "friend" or going out for coffee. Rather, meaningful connection can be achieved by small but consistent signs of empathy and interest: using students' names when you address them, asking about their lives, sharing experiences that may resonate with students, writing positive individualized notes on student papers and generally recognizing students' efforts, challenges and accomplishments. While making these connections, however, it is equally important to not come across as favoring one person or group in a class. Among other consequences, this erodes the sense of student-teacher connection of those who perceive themselves as not being in this select group.

MICHAEL BERMAN is professor of ESL at Montgomery College in Rockville, MD, USA, and the founder of Language Arts Press. At the college, he has served as EAP program coordinator and as associate dean of humanities, among other roles. He is an active (compulsive?) materials writer and has won awards for his published ESL materials as well as his teaching.

References

Cialdini, Robert B. *Influence: The Psychology of Persuasion*, Revised Edition, New York: Harper Collins, 2006.

Dispenza, Joe. "The Brain: Neuroplasticity and How to Make Lasting Changes." *Well Being Journal*, March/April 2013, Vol. 22, No. 2: 27-29.

Sapolsky, Robert M. *Why Zebras Don't Get Ulcers*, 3rd Edition, New York: Henry Holt & Company. 2004.

www.LanguageArtsPress.com