

Motivating Translation Students

by
Dina M. Al-Sibai

The Importance of Motivation:

It is generally accepted that motivation is a key factor in successful language learning. It is equally applicable that even the most motivated student may gradually lose interest and energy during his or her language studies, regardless of the language being taught. As such, teachers of English must constantly search for effective teaching strategies, as well as for ways to maintain and arouse the interest and active participation of students in their classes.

Students often fail to reach their full potential as English language learners due to low or ineffective motivation. As an example in point, Niederhauser (1997) contends that low motivation among Korean students is affected by factors associated with language learning, particularly prior learning experience. By the time they enter college, almost all Korean students have already completed at least six years of English classes. Despite this fact, the majority of them are unable to carry on simple conversations with native English speakers or write sentences free of basic grammatical errors. Although many Korean middle and high school teachers manage teacher-centered classrooms in which little English is spoken, college freshmen often tend to blame themselves for their lack of communicative competence.

Saudi college students are no different. Indeed, this “phenomenon” is discussed and elaborated upon time and again by various College of Languages and Translation (COLT) teachers and administrators at King Saud University. Like the Koreans, our own students – boys and girls – face similar problems. As a remedy, COLT teachers are advised and encouraged to be “tough but fair”. This attitude has taken a life all of its own and has become almost an all-encompassing motto at COLT. To be sure, many researchers do believe that students must be held to high standards of learning. Supporting this view, Becker & Schneider (2003) write “If students are not required to maintain a specified level of learning and performance, only the most highly motivated students will devote the time and effort necessary to learn. In contrast, maintaining high standards not only will motivate student learning, it also will be the source of student feelings of accomplishment when those standards are met.”

As previously mentioned, this “tough but fair” attitude has become an almost ingrained policy at COLT. An exasperating factor is the tremendous increase in the number of students entering KSU and wishing to join COLT’s programs, particularly those relating to English. As teachers, we are constantly amazed at the poor or low language level of many of such students. So, COLT’s policy of setting high standards seems appropriate to maintain quality learning and to retain the students who, eventually, are able to complete their studies successfully. Students who perform poorly are advised to find alternative study programs. Others drop out completely when their GPAs go down beyond a viable level of acceptance by KSU.

So, while I agree with setting high standards for students as a way to motivate them to work harder, it is my belief that this is just one of many strategies we can employ with our students. However, before considering other options, it would be prudent to find out why our students have chosen to join the Translation Department at COLT. This could be useful to teachers in preparing and refining their course syllabi, assignments, and teaching techniques.

(A) What Are the COLT Students' Reasons for Learning English?

Based on my experience during the past 6 years of teaching at COLT, I am convinced that the majority of students are more focused on passing their exams than on realizing the academic and cultural benefits gained by acquiring reading, writing, and listening competency in English which will eventually enhance their language and translation skills. This is evident during class discussions at the beginning of each semester as students want detailed information on the type and style of questions to expect in their exams. Citing the psychologist Hebb (1992), Shuying (1999) writes "It is motivation that initiates behavior, directs it, and is also responsible for its cessation." The author goes on to point out that exam scores cannot be considered a viable or a reliable motivational factor. Hence, finding other means to raise students' motivation and define their objectives must be a paramount concern for any teacher.

At the beginning of teaching a course, I explain to my students what is expected of them for the whole semester, i.e. in terms of assignments, exams, and the distribution of points. I feel this exercise is quite important because hard working students have always been, and will always be obsessed with their grades regardless of their desire and motivation towards learning English. I believe this to be true because of my own concerns and apprehensions as a student. Feelings of anxiety over grades cannot be underestimated. Unfortunately, our educational system puts great emphasis on exams and the consequences our grades hold for us. So, if I am able to put my students' minds a bit at ease regarding what is expected of them in exams, then I may have the chance to motivate them to learn what needs to be learned. Kavaliauskiene (2004) seems to have experienced this situation with her Korean students. She observes "Another stereotype that students had been used to at school was that learning was exam- or test-oriented. Learners usually expect to be graded for any activity they perform. The idea of learning for the sake of language knowledge and its prospective usage and not for the sake of passing an exam seemed to majority of learners unthinkable."

Once I get started with a course, I discuss with my students the value and importance of such a course in relation to other translation courses that they had taken or will take. There is a point worth stressing here; all the students in the Translation Department are there because one day they hope to become either translators or interpreters. This is quite relevant for us teachers because a crucial step in teaching any foreign language is to know the students' reasons for learning it. Since the students in the Translation Department are learning English for purposes relating to translation, it should become infinitely easier for teachers to arrange their material and syllabi accordingly, and to adopt suitable teaching strategies and techniques.

It goes without saying that it is a blessing to work in an educational environment where students' aims and objectives could be discerned easily and correctly. However, this does not mean that all teachers, especially inexperienced ones, know how to accomplish this task. So, what is a teacher to do? A first step is to realize that such a quest may entail time, experience, and age-old trial and error. Another is to employ available means to pinpoint and analyze students' needs. Kavaliauskiene & Uzpaliene (2003) suggest that teachers interested in finding out their students' requirements may conduct on them what is known as "needs analysis." The authors point out that such analysis has figured notably in the literature of language teaching for the last 30 years, with particular emphasis on learners' communicative needs. They also cite Dudley-Evans & Jo St John (1998) who give detailed explanation of "needs analysis" and its interpretational techniques including professional and personal information about potential learners, their reasons for learning and utilizing English, their true attitude toward English, any previous language experiences, etc.

Proponents of “needs analysis” employ three methods for data collection: questionnaires, discussions, and interviews. In other words, learners themselves become the main sources of information. Of the three methods, questionnaires are the least time-consuming. In turn, they offer teachers the opportunity to determine learners’ long-term aims as well as short-term objectives. The following are some sample questions usually found in “needs analysis” questionnaires:

1st question: What do you need English for?

2nd question: What kind of English course do you anticipate?

3rd question: How do you assess your proficiency in language skills?

4th question: What are your strengths and weaknesses in a foreign language?

5th question: What are your preferences for teaching styles?

Discussions and interviews are also considered to be reliable sources for gathering data on learners’ needs. Well organized and evenly divided weekly slots in a teacher’s schedule may allow students to get his or her advice on an individual basis, i.e. one-to-one communication. For shy or introverted students such tutoring could prove quite beneficial because it removes feelings of anxiety and fear of mistakes and puts the learner at ease. In such a situation, learners are apt to talk about their difficulties and, in the process, seek their teacher’s assistance and support, thus indirectly revealing their current needs and requirements. Hence, analysis of ongoing learners’ needs, wants, and lacks allow teachers to adjust course syllabi to students’ future needs, or what is known as ‘real world’ needs. In turn, this fact, could play a strong role in the development of a learner’s ability to transfer language knowledge to new situations as well as the utilization of acquired language skills in real life communication.

(B) Strategies For Raising Student Motivation:

Among other researchers, Reilly (2001) believes that an important task for any teacher is to make learners feel important. According to Maslow’s well-known hierarchy of human needs, before people can achieve certain levels of growth and creativity, they must feel secure in their own surroundings. Language students are no different. A practical way of fostering a secure and caring environment is for teachers to initiate brief give and take discussions as well as to listen with empathy at the end of classroom periods. A teacher may ask his or her students to reflect on a number of issues such as learning techniques, ease or difficulty of goals being pursued, their feelings and experiences, etc. Teachers may also encourage their students to think silently for 30 to 40 seconds, then ask a few to volunteer to share their thoughts with the class.

Using empathy this way sends a clear message to the students that their experience and feelings are important. Because empathy is nonjudgmental, learners’ sense of security is enhanced. Since a compassionate teacher is often perceived and accepted as a leader, the tone is set: people are sincerely listened to and understood in this environment. (Rogers and Kramer, 1995) in Reilly (2001) state that students report feeling acceptance when their teachers foster genuine and sincere expression and understanding of mutual feelings. Concerned teachers should also take the time to get to know their students individually at the start of each semester. This enforces a mutual sense of respect between teacher and student. As one of eight rules to motivating students, Becker & Schneider (2003) declare “Treat students with respect. Give students their dignity, and they will give you their best efforts.”

It goes without saying that any conscientious teacher cannot but agree with such a golden rule. I have always tried to reassure my students and to treat them with utmost respect. The

results are amazing, for students do indeed appreciate and reciprocate these gestures. My method is easy and simple. At the beginning and throughout the semester I ask them repeatedly not to hesitate to raise questions and to inquire whenever they are in doubt or do not understand any part of a lesson. I go all the way to assure them that I am always ready to help them not only in the classroom but also in my office. Although I provide them with clear and concise Arabic equivalents, I always urge them to ask about those vocabulary items that they find difficult to comprehend. I am keen on this issue because they are translation majors and need all the help they can get in mastering vocabulary intricacies.

In the Comparative Culture course, which I currently teach, one of the things students really enjoy is presenting examples and situations from our society in contrast to others. Equally enjoyable and amusing to them is when I give examples from my own experiences in life. I could actually see smiles forming and glimmers in their eyes when I mentioned that my three year old daughter, Noor, tries to establish eye contact with me when she wants something. I talk about this as an example of the importance of eye contact in the study of kinesics.

It is my belief that such encounters foster a sense of togetherness and strengthen the relationship between teachers and their students. Students feel that they become somehow closer to teachers which, in turn, means that a teacher can enjoy the company of his or her students enough to talk to them informally and casually from time to time. To be sure, different teachers have different ways of making their students feel important, but I really like this idea of listening with empathy at the end of the lecture. I have tried it and find it quite effective.

Another strategy for motivating students is to introduce new activities. This, however, should be done carefully and with ample explanation of how such activities are to improve the students' English language skills. Niederhauser (1997) maintains that motivation levels drop and anxiety levels go up when students are uncertain about how or why they should perform specific language tasks. Hence, making clear and positive statements about upcoming activities is an excellent way to increase enthusiasm and motivation. For example, saying, "I think you're really going to enjoy our next activity," and meaning it, teachers are sure to convey a true state of positive anticipation and excitement. (Brophy,1998) in Reilly (2001) reports that too often students do not know why they are participating in learning activities. One may equate this with asking people to practice hunting without knowing the target. As such, people are more involved and derive more satisfaction from activities with defined aims and which they can understand.

Traditionally, the teacher is the one who knows all. In this setting, the lesson plan is private information for the teacher, and students passively receive instruction. One of the aims of contemporary language teaching is to demystify the learning process for learners. An example of demystifying learning is related to error correction. It is generally accepted that at the beginning of a lesson, learners are often engaged in controlled activities. However, as lessons come to an end, students usually participate in freer, more communicative tasks. As a lesson begins, teachers should explain that they will correct mistakes because controlled activities often center on a grammar point or specific function and require accuracy. The teacher then should explain that later in the lesson, during the subsequent communicative tasks, no correction will be given because the purpose here is to develop fluency. Thus, learners will understand why correction is given early in the lesson but not during its later stages.

Another example has to do with teacher guidance. According to Becker & Schneider (2003) teachers should point out to students which information is "fact" and, thus, must be

memorized and which course material is based upon “logic.” They should show students how to employ logical thinking to learn and retain new information. Teachers should also help students learn how to create a “link” when learning something new. If the student is given the skill to “link” the new material to something already learned, the fear and apprehension of learning the new material are greatly reduced.

In my experience as an English language teacher, I try to clarify to my students my ways of teaching quite early in the semester. This definitely demystifies the process and, hopefully, sets all of us on the right path. In addition to explaining the method I follow in correcting verbal and written mistakes, I pass out a syllabus detailing exam dates, progression of subject matter, and other points of importance relating to the course being taught. Time and again, I have found out that such a modest effort on my part has paid off handsomely in establishing a strong and sustained rapport between me and my students for the remainder of a whole semester.

A third strategy for increasing motivation is to bring cultural content into the language classroom. For example, in a society like Saudi Arabia where conflict between globalization and nationalism remains unresolved, many of the younger generation greatly appreciate the opportunity to learn about life in other countries and to exchange ideas with teachers who are sensitive to both cultures. Niederhauser (1997) touches on this issue when observing, “Although most institutions in South Korea have not yet adopted a more content-based approach to language learning and usually employ native speakers solely to teach lower level language courses, teachers can weave cultural content into any course by selecting appropriate texts and activities. Setting aside ten minutes at the end of each lesson to allow students to ask questions about American culture or other cultures of English-speaking countries is easy to do and gives students a chance to talk about dating practices, campus life, or anything else they choose.” Hence, efforts to increase the linguistic competence of students may depend on the creation of classrooms that foster not only communication but also a better appreciation for English-speaking cultures.

During the first two years in the Translation Department, the majority of courses are skill-oriented, such as writing, speaking, reading, listening, and grammar. I have found that it is very easy to incorporate cultural content into writing and speaking. Students find the material informative and interesting. However, for grammar, one tries to insert a few bits and pieces of cultural information, but students are often not too enthusiastic because of the very dry nature of the subject. Though I have not taught reading and listening, I feel that they could lend themselves to cultural content more easily than grammar. I completely agree with Corria (1999) when he explains that it is important to enhance the classroom atmosphere through advertisements, posters, messages, pictures, drawings, cartoons, and photos posted on bulletin boards. Local or international news can also be given to the class in the target language. Thus, the students are surrounded by items that resemble the culture of the target language which give learners the feeling of really learning the language.

A fourth strategy is providing authentic texts as much as possible. According to Weisen (2000), authentic texts bring learners closer to the target language and can be a rich source of enjoyment and motivation. Weisen observes that in studies of learners’ attitudes toward authentic materials, such as Chavez (1998) and Little, Devitt, & Singleton (1989), it was found that learners enjoy interacting with authentic materials. Motivation and learner confidence also increase when using text materials relating to students’ professional objectives and from their respective fields of knowledge. Equally important is that learners with high levels of interest comprehend texts more fully, use advanced strategies, and perform better when questioned.

From my experience, I personally believe that teacher enthusiasm is contagious. Students cannot resist learning when they are faced with interesting relevant texts combined with enthusiastic instruction.

The inclusion of cultural content and authentic texts leads one to think that what Weisen (2000) has proposed will also increase learners' chances of becoming motivated towards learning a foreign language. Kavaliauskiene (2004) believes that a foreign language is most successfully acquired when learners are engaged in its meaningful use. Language learning and content of subject matter can be brought together in what is called "Content-Based Instruction" or CBI. The integration of language and content involves the incorporation of content material into language classes. CBI is sometimes referred to as 'language across the curriculum', and has become increasingly popular as a means of developing linguistic ability. In this respect, content can provide a motivational and cognitive basis for language learning since it is interesting and of tangible value to the learner. In another work, Kavaliauskiene & Uzpalienė (2003) maintain that keeping specific learners' needs in mind, energetic teachers can use textbooks as well as supplement additional information from the Internet and other media sources, thus creating updated and interesting content materials for their students.

For example, I've had the opportunity to teach a course called "Language and Culture". Students come to this course not knowing what to expect. To be honest too, the first time I taught this course I also had no idea of what was "expected" of me. The reason was the vagueness of the course description at the time. However, the only thing that saved the day then was the emphasis I put on exploring a good number of expressions and concepts that lie within the American societal and cultural umbrella. Each week I would post in the classroom advertisements, greeting cards, messages, etc. which enforced what we had already discussed or would be discussing. I could see how interested my students became with the passage of time, and how they looked forward to reading those weekly postings. I believe that if the information which they had to study had not been couched in a specific setting, be it American or otherwise, they would have found the course to be extremely dry, dull, and less rewarding. On the other hand, the students ended up enjoying the course tremendously because the content or subject matter was presented within a relevant framework.

Niederhauser (1997) champions another strategy. The author explains that creating classroom activities which foster real communication will enhance motivation. Teachers of college-level writing classes, for example, can help their students write articles for the campus columns in the English language dailies or even correspond with students in other countries. We are told of an experiment in which a group of his students put together a collection of short articles they wrote about themselves and their country, Korea, and then sent to another group of students in a high school global studies course in the United States. The author maintains that his students were proud of their role as co-teachers of the course's unit on Korea and worked on the project with great enthusiasm.

Unfortunately, one of the skills courses which COLT does not give enough attention is speaking. I say unfortunately because many of our Department's future graduates hope to become interpreters. I am very sad to say that a majority of them are unable to get the jobs they dream of due to their poor oral competence. I have noticed that many of our students are very self-conscious when asked to express their views in public. This is true even if their language abilities are comparatively good. In high schools the emphasis is on examinations; therefore, developing students' communicative abilities is not stressed. As a result, college students are

not as competent in speaking, and almost all have difficulties in pronunciation. This makes them unwilling to communicate in the target language for fear of being ridiculed.

When I taught speaking, I tried to be as motivational as possible. I would begin the course by analyzing the learning backgrounds of my students and trying to find a way so they would speak voluntarily in class. I tried to design interesting and meaningful activities to motivate them so they would participate voluntarily in those activities. The course was three credit hours, and it took two hours to finish one chapter each week. So, I decided to play games such as 'Taboo' or 'Show and Tell' with my students during the third hour of each week. This lowered their apprehension and encouraged many of them to speak freely. Sometimes I brought small wrapped prizes to motivate them and the winning team would be so happy with the prizes they got. I am sure that their happiness was due not only to the actual prizes they had received but also to a sense of accomplishment in being able to express themselves in a foreign language.

Shuying (1999) seems to experiment with similar ideas based on the stick-carrot principle. She tells her students at the beginning of a course on speaking that 50% of their final grade would be based on their in-class participation. As a further incentive, those who speak in every class would get even higher scores, regardless of what their utterances or accent might be. This sounds quite tempting. However, I believe that such a strategy heavily relies on the subjective evaluations of the teacher and is only conceivable when there are a small number of students in class. So, if I am ever lucky enough to teach a small speaking class in the future, I may like to test the validity of this strategy.

Another experimenter is Izquierdo (1993) who suggests that real-life simulations and role plays are highly motivating for students. A teacher's primary function here is to provide the students with any information they might need, mostly on vocabulary, and to clear up any doubts they might have regarding pronunciation, intonation, etc. According to the author the aim of this approach is "to have the students do something with the language, to actively use the language they produce themselves for the situation. They must acquire new identities, become someone else, and speak accordingly -- a salesman, a postman, a parent, a son, or a daughter." As for me, I did try this approach more than once. I can testify to its merits and that it does indeed encourage and motivate students to speak.

In conclusion, all of the strategies mentioned above seem to be quite convincing and really deserve to be applied in our language classrooms. As for my dear translation students, I would like to point out that in learning how to translate professionally, each student must be equipped with an excellent command of all the basic skills of the English language. Equally important is the recognition that acquiring target language vocabulary must be paramount in all courses belonging to the Translation Department. Students often struggle with new vocabulary in almost every course, especially introductory ones. To succeed in these courses, students must become comfortable with new terminology. As subjects are presented, new or confusing terms should be identified and introduced to the students.

Learning vocabulary is more effective when it is learnt from the context. Content-related vocabulary is easier to memorize and retain. Such learning implies doing a vast amount of reading. Learners are expected to read a text on a specific topic and pick up professional terms. An example in point is my own experience in teaching a course on comparative culture. I have incorporated a two-columned empty table at the end of every lesson. Once the lesson is explained, I ask the students to scan the lesson and to look for the ten most difficult words they came across. I write these words on the board, and students start writing them in the table.

Students are then asked to search for their proper translations. At the beginning of the following lecture, the students and I go through the list together to ensure that the terms have been correctly translated and well understood.

I strongly believe that teachers must be as creative as possible when it comes to supplementing existing material with the type of material that learners need for their own purposes. Fortunately, finding a balance between the teaching of English and the learner's own aims and using other motivating techniques has proven to be very successful.

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