

## **4.1 Making learning stimulating and enjoyable**

People are usually quite willing to spend a great deal of time thinking and learning while pursuing activities they *enjoy*. Just think of all the hours we devote to, say, doing crosswords, rehearsing for amateur theatre performances or fiddling with the computer. These examples suggest that learning does not necessarily have to be a boring and tedious chore (which it very often is). If we could somehow make the learning process more stimulating and enjoyable, that would greatly contribute to sustained learner involvement. This is an assumption that most motivational psychologists subscribe to and which also makes a lot of sense to classroom teachers – indeed, many practitioners would simply equate the adjective ‘motivating’ with ‘interesting’.

### *Can you still remember?*

‘When I was a teenager – you know what I mean, that’s always a problem for everybody – when I was a teenager, as I said, I would prefer to be with my friends or to be at home watching TV. Sometimes I was in the class and I was looking at the clock saying, “Oh, please let it run faster!” and sometimes the teacher was talking and I was not listening because I was really anxious to go out and be somewhere else, you know?’

(From an interview with a learner of English; adapted from Silva 2001)

Let us start with a puzzling question. If both theoreticians and practitioners agree on the importance of making learning stimulating and enjoyable, why does available research indicate that the general characteristic of classroom learning is usually just the opposite: unglamorous and drudgery-like? Well, there are several reasons:

- Many teachers (and also students) share the belief that serious learning is supposed to be hard work, and if it is enjoyable, it is doubtful that it is serious or significant. Indeed, as Raffini (1996:11) summarises well, ‘too often the word “enjoyable” has a bad reputation in school’.
- With increasing pressures on teachers to cover the curriculum and to prepare students for tests and exams, their emphasis inevitably shifts from the process – the extent of learner involvement and enjoyment – to the product, that is, to producing fast and tangible outcomes.
- Not all assignments can be fully engaging. We have to teach the whole curriculum and certain parts are bound to be less attractive for

the students than others. Covington and Teel (1996:90) rightly point out that we teachers are not in the entertainment business, and cannot be expected to turn everything into fun.

- School learning includes a lot of seatwork. This is in spite of the fact that, as already mentioned, most school learners are in the most active phase of their physical development and find it extremely difficult to spend most of the working day practically motionless.

This has been the bad news. The good news is that there is an impressive array of motivational strategies that have been found to be effective in livening up classroom learning. This suggests that, within what is feasible, we might be able to find an angle for making learning more stimulating in many, if not most, situations. Broadly speaking, we can pursue three main types of strategy:

- *breaking the monotony of learning,*
- *making the tasks more interesting,*
- *increasing the involvement of the students.*

Of course, these three stimulation goals overlap. What breaks the monotony of learning will also make the process more interesting, and what is interesting may encourage further student involvement. Yet I find that it makes the discussion clearer if we address these issues independently. We should also note here that all the other motivational aspects discussed later in this chapter also contribute to the quality of the learning experience, since in a way everything that motivates students to learn increases the attraction of the course.

*Well said . . .*

*‘Ensure success. . . . We can bend over backwards explaining the advantages of speaking a foreign language but the pupils’ outlook is often more immediate than that. They like what they are good at.’*  
(Jenifer Alison 1993:12)

*Breaking the monotony of learning*

Even in classes characterised by a mixture of interesting teaching approaches, there is a danger that as the school year progresses, both teachers and students can easily settle into familiar routines. The routines, then, can easily turn into a monotonous ‘daily grind’, with the class losing its ‘edge’. Monotony is inversely related to variety. In order

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to break monotony, we need to vary as many aspects of the learning process as possible. First and foremost are the *language tasks*. For example, we can vary the:

- linguistic focus of the tasks (e.g. a grammar task can be followed by one focusing on sociocultural issues);
- main language skills the tasks activate (e.g. a writing task can be followed by a speaking activity);
- channel of communication (varying auditory, visual and tactile modes of dealing with learning; selectively using visual aids);
- organisational format (e.g. a whole-class task can be followed by group work or pair work).

Variety, however, is not confined to tasks alone. It can also concern other aspects of the teaching/learning process, such as:

- our presentation style;
- the learning materials;
- the extent of student involvement (e.g. occasionally students lead some of the activities);
- the classroom's spatial organisation (e.g. how the tables and chairs are arranged).

The final aspect of how to break the monotony of classroom teaching concerns the *general rhythm and sequence of events*. Although various teaching events in a class are traditionally based on the 'logical flow of information' (Wlodkowski 1986:145), from a motivational perspective the 'motivational flow' is just as important. For example, it may be worth starting the class with a '*warmer*', which can be a short, stimulating game, to set the tone. Or, a slow section of the lesson that requires contemplation can be followed by a break involving some sort of movement, or a fast sequence of events requiring a different kind of concentration (e.g. a short game).

Of course, I am not trying to suggest that instructors should systematically and continuously vary all the above aspects of their teaching – that would be the perfect recipe for teacher burn-out. Rather, we may look at these variables as, say, cooking ingredients, and all we need to make sure is that we don't serve exactly the same meal every day. And, to top it off, we may want, from time to time, to *do the unexpected*. An occasional departure from what the students have come to expect can cause the final surge in the motivational flow (what a metaphor . . .).

**Strategy 17**

*Make learning more stimulating and enjoyable by breaking the monotony of classroom events.*

More specifically:

- Vary the learning tasks and other aspects of your teaching as much as you can.
- Focus on the motivational flow and not just the information flow in your class.
- Occasionally do the unexpected.

*Making the tasks more interesting*

Varying the tasks is important but not even the richest variety will motivate if the content of the tasks is not attractive to the students – that is, if the task is *boring*. The literature contains an abundance of suggestions on how to make tasks interesting. The trouble is that in real life most of the tasks we use are prescribed by the official course syllabus or coursebook, and teachers usually have little time to introduce new activities. So, when I list the most commonly quoted characteristics of motivating tasks, it is in the hope that some of these might just lend themselves to modifying some official task.

***What's wrong with boredom?***

Humans are, in fact, amazingly capable of producing concentrated effort when they want to, regardless of any uninspiring presentation or dull practice sequence (self-motivating strategies, as discussed in Section 4.8, come in very handy at times like these). The real problem with boredom is twofold:

- It is a fertile ground for disruptions – sometimes we can hardly wait for an excuse to ‘take a break’.
- It does not inspire further, continuing motivation. Boring but systematic teaching can be effective in getting short-term results, but rarely does it inspire a life-long commitment to the subject matter.

What are the most motivating features of task content? Here are some ideas:

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- *Challenge*: Humans like to be challenged, as evidenced by our continual fascination with crosswords, puzzles or computer games, and the same applies to taking risks if those are moderate. This means that tasks in which learners need to solve problems, discover something, overcome obstacles, avoid traps, find hidden information, etc. are always welcome.
- *Interesting content*: A simple but effective way to raise task interest is to connect the topic with things that students already find interesting or hold in esteem. For example, including prominent events or people from the youth culture can add an attractive dimension to the activity. Learning about, say, daily routines can become much more interesting by focusing on a famous pop star, trying to imagine what he/she does and does not do.
- *The novelty element*: If something about the activity is new or different or unfamiliar or totally unexpected, this will certainly help to eliminate boredom.
- *The intriguing element*: Tasks which concern ambiguous, problematic, paradoxical, controversial, contradictory or incongruous material stimulate curiosity by creating a conceptual conflict that needs to be resolved.
- *The exotic element*: We all like learning about places and people which are unique and have a certain amount of grandeur.
- *The fantasy element*: Tasks are inherently captivating if they engage the learner's fantasy. Everybody, children and adults alike, enjoy using their imagination for creating make-believe stories, identifying with fictional characters or acting out pretend play.
- *The personal element*: There is something inherently interesting about learning about the everyday life of real people (I don't know why); this has been capitalised on by TV soap operas and their generally high viewing rates prove that the principle works. In a similar vein, many stilted coursebook tasks can be made stimulating by personalising them, that is, by relating the content to the learners' own lives.

### *Well said . . .*

'If we consider the students in our classes to be more interesting than the rather cardboard characters found in the traditional coursebook, it follows that a real need exists for activities where the students are invited to speak to each other and express their ideas using structures that have already been presented to them. Practising structures in this very personal series of contexts is much more emotionally real than practising them in the make-belief world of a textbook.'

(Frank and Rinvoluceri 1991:6)

- *Competition*: The opportunity to compete can add excitement to learning tasks, regardless of whether the competition is for prizes (e.g. a packet of sweets) or merely for the satisfaction of winning. The only problem with small group competition is, as Brophy (1998) emphasises, that you cannot have winners without losers, and the latter usually outnumber the former. Make sure, therefore, that losers do not take it very seriously. . . .
- *Tangible outcome*: Tasks which require learners to create some kind of a finished product as the outcome (e.g. student newsletter, a poster, a radio programme, an information brochure or a piece of artwork) can engage students to an unprecedented extent.
- *Humour*: ‘Humour is many things and one of them is interesting’ (Wlodkowski 1986:161).

### *Strategy 18*

*Make learning stimulating and enjoyable for the learner by increasing the attractiveness of the tasks.*

More specifically:

- Make tasks challenging.
- Make task content attractive by adapting it to the students’ natural interests or by including novel, intriguing, exotic, humorous, competitive or fantasy elements.
- Personalise learning tasks.
- Select tasks that yield tangible, finished products.

### *Increasing student involvement*

People usually enjoy a task if they play an essential part in it. This is well illustrated by class discussions, which are usually perceived to be interesting by those who have contributed to it and boring by those who have not. This means that another way of making learning stimulating and enjoyable is creating learning situations where learners are required to become active participants. Sometimes learners need a more direct nudge than merely presenting an opportunity for participation, and handing out specific roles (e.g. on cards) or giving them personalised assignments are necessary to provide the needed momentum.

**Strategy 19**

*Make learning stimulating and enjoyable for the learners by enlisting them as active task participants.*

More specifically:

- Select tasks which require mental and/or bodily involvement from each participant.
- Create specific roles and personalised assignments for everybody.

## **4.2 Presenting tasks in a motivating way**

Sometimes it is easier said than done that we should make learning stimulating and enjoyable. How often have you managed to teach, for example, the grammatical rules governing the use of the definite article in an ‘adventurous’ and ‘exotic’ way, capitalising on the ‘arousal value of suspense’, while raising the learners’ ‘epistemic curiosity’ and stimulating their ‘fantasy’ (as recommended in the literature)? The fact is that some topics we teach are unlikely to interest students even though it is in their interest to learn them. This is when motivational techniques related to how to *present* and *administer* tasks come in particularly useful. I have found that the way we present tasks can make a huge difference in how students perceive and approach them. With a proper introduction, even a grammatical substitution drill can be made (almost) exciting. So, what is a ‘proper’ introduction in the motivational sense?

Beside the traditional purpose of task instructions – namely, to describe what students will be doing, what they will have accomplished when they are finished, and how these accomplishments will be evaluated – the motivational introduction of an activity fulfils at least three further functions:

- It explains the purpose and the utility of the task.
- It whets the students’ anticipation of the task.
- It provides appropriate strategies for doing the task.

***Interesting research . . .***

Jere Brophy (1998:187–8) describes a research project in which he and his colleagues observed how experienced, better-than-average teachers administered tasks in mathematics and reading classes. The disappointing result of the study was that only about a third of the teachers' task introductions included comments which were judged by the researchers as ones that were likely to have positive effects on student motivation. Furthermore, even these comments were mostly only brief predictions that the students would enjoy the task or would do well on it. All in all, in about 100 hours of classroom observation, only nine task introductions were noted that included substantive information related to the motivation to learn!

*Explaining the purpose and the utility of a task*

Even experienced teachers sometimes expect students to carry out a task without offering them any real explanation about the purpose of the activity. Students are too often required to do things in the classroom just because the teacher says so. In this sense schools (unfortunately) resemble the armed forces, which is not exactly the ideal model for a motivationally conscious teacher. In civilian contexts, the usual way of asking people to do something involves communicating good reasons to them as to why the particular activity is meaningful or important, and I can't see why the introduction of learning tasks should not follow this pattern. If we want our students to give their best when attending to a task, they need to see the point in what they do. As Scheidecker and Freeman (1999:140) summarise:

Every new unit, every venue of instruction, should be preceded by a justification of its presence. . . . Informed clients are much more likely to join the successful completion of the project voluntarily than disenfranchised students who have been asked to trust the system.

In accordance, it may be useful to cover the following points when presenting a task:

- Emphasise that the task is a learning opportunity to be valued rather than an imposed demand to be resisted.
- Explain where the activity fits in within a sequence or bigger picture, and how it relates to the overall goals of the class.



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- Describe the intended purpose of the activity and what this implies about how students should respond to it (e.g. what they should concentrate on or be particularly careful about).
- Try and make a connection between the task and the students' personal daily life, and point out how the skills learnt will be useful in enabling them to achieve real-life agendas.

### *Whetting the students' appetite*

Good task introductions raise the students' expectations of something interesting and important to come. You can do this by:

- projecting intensity and enthusiasm when you introduce the activity; and communicating your expectation for students to succeed;
- asking students to make guesses and predictions about the upcoming activity (e.g. what is going to be covered; how long a listening passage will take, etc.);
- pointing out challenging or important aspects of the L2 content to be learned;
- adding a twist to routine activities (e.g. asking them to do a grammar drill very fast or whispering).

### *Providing appropriate strategies to do the task*

The final aspect of a good task introduction concerns the strategies that students should apply to complete the task successfully. I have often found in the past that when I presented what I considered a very creative communicative activity, some of the learners simply did not concentrate enough on my instructions to understand what was required of them, and others did not really know how to go about completing the task. This was, in a way, understandable: when preparing for the class I spent a relatively long time imagining the activity sequence and envisaging who does what, whereas the students were asked to do all this promptly after the instructions. Therefore, it usually pays off to spend a bit longer demonstrating the task and illustrating some of the strategies that might be particularly effective during task completion as it can effectively sort out any confusion or lingering doubts. I have also developed a very practical rule of thumb for myself: the task instruction should spell out exactly what students need to do immediately after the instruction is over.

***Quite so!***

‘Work with the learner at the beginning of difficult tasks. It’s amazing what can be lifted and moved with just a little help. Sometimes a learner might have a momentary confusion or not know what to do next. Our proximity and minimal assistance can be just enough for the learner to find the right direction, continue involvement, and gain the initial confidence to proceed with learning.’

(Raymond Wlodkowski 1986:92)

The best way to demonstrate the necessary strategies and skills is to *model* them (another rule of thumb of mine is, ‘Never explain, demonstrate!’). You can do this, for example, by pretending to be a student and performing various roles, or you can ask volunteers to act out your guidelines. Another, less commonly used way is the ‘think-aloud’ technique, which involves saying out loud the various steps taken in approaching and dealing with an issue and how performing a complex task can be broken down into smaller steps. It is also useful to remind students of previously learned knowledge or skills that they can make use of during task completion. Before making a bigger assignment, you can also get the whole class to brainstorm lists of strategies for getting the project done.

***Strategy 20***

*Present and administer tasks in a motivating way.*

More specifically:

- Explain the purpose and utility of a task.
- Whet the students’ appetite about the content of the task.
- Provide appropriate strategies to carry out the task.

### **4.3 Setting specific learner goals**

We have already talked about *goals* in Section 3.3, but there the focus was on the learners’ and – more importantly – the class group’s general level of goal-orientedness. However, there is more to goals. Here we