



The Crossing into the "Dark Side Of Motivation" for Educators and Students and How to Avoid It

Four Pitfalls which May Prevent ELT Teachers from Generating Motivation in the Classroom

George Kokolas

ULS, Ireland
Express Publishing, UK

Abstract

Students' motivation is a complex and multifaceted issue widely studied in education. While some forms of motivation can lead to positive outcomes for students, negative consequences can also arise from practices that most teachers are unaware they may be practising in their classes. The author metaphorically names these practices as "the dark side" of motivation and specifies them within an educational school context. The "dark side of motivation" refers to practices or strategies that may initially seem harmless, seem part of the everyday classroom routines, and sometimes seem part of "generally accepted educational schemes" but may also impede students' motivation. These impediments can include decreased intrinsic motivation, classroom well-being, and academic engagement. The author will mention and analyse some of the most frequent pitfalls for teachers, such as the Curse of Knowledge, the Sisyphean Condition, the identical effects of physical and emotional pain and the attempt to use grades as rewards as apparent motivators that may not work all the time or even discourage motivation. Finally, this paper will explore the psychological and educational theories that underlie the practices within "the dark side of motivation" and mention some practical strategies for promoting positive, student-centered approaches to motivation. By avoiding the questionable practices which may lead to the "dark side of motivation", educators can create a more supportive and empowering learning environment that fosters student engagement, well-being, and academic success.

Keywords: *dark side of motivation, impediments of motivation*

Motivating people is a multifaceted concept with many bibliographies, theories, references, and research behind it. It is not just a topic to research or talk about but an ever-asked question that may still need to receive a definite answer. We have read many suggestions, recommendations, results, and opinions, but it is still being determined if a universal remedy can consistently generate motivation in various contexts. On top of that, by trying to bring motivation into an English Language Teaching (ELT) context, teachers may struggle to discover what can work or not.

The moment when Zoltan Dörnyei and Jill Hadfield tried to define the concept of the "Ideal Future Language Self" [2] (Dörnyei, Hadfield, 2013) was pivotal in the literature on motivation for learning. The theory urged teachers to help students create a successful vision of themselves as competent English users. Following this vision, the theory assumed students would work harder to achieve this image. It is a sophisticated, scientifically justified, and well-communicated theory, followed by many recommended activities that could work in any classroom. However, it is challenging to know how many times and by how many teachers any of these activities were tested and how many of them yielded some motivation.

In the meantime, while educators may be considering or searching for "plug-and-play" motivational remedies, we fail to realise that there might be a stage before trying these methods. We call it a frame of mind or mindset in which we become inert, passive, or even standstill regarding our willingness or objective to generate motivation. It is maybe the moment when educators are crossing into, what can be metaphorically called, the "Dark Side of Motivation" without even realising it.

It is more than evident that "lack of motivation" does not necessarily yield "demotivation" but may obstruct us as teachers from generating motivation for our students. For example, it may be an incident with a student that teachers may take light-heartedly as a non-significant one, a false impression they form in their minds, or even an atomic habit that may stop them from thinking in



"terms of motivation". Any of the above states can cause negative feelings in students, make them lose focus on the lesson or even discourage them from responding to any motivational schemes generated by the teacher.

This paper will try to raise some awareness by pinpointing four different states during which various motivational remedies or methods attempted by educators may fail, not thrive or even be discouraged due to the educator's lack of perspective, awareness or even unawareness of the student's feelings or thoughts during these four different situations.

Motivation is not only about Rewards.

Grades are essential for assessment. They help teachers evaluate students and provide a measuring reference for setting goals. They also help communication with parents but can be tricky or dubious regarding students' motivation. They can be like a "double-edged sword," on the one hand, nudging and pushing students to pursue higher performance or even prepare for better results, but on the other hand, what if they will not? Is there any guaranteed success that grades can yield motivation?

In a somewhat revolutionary way, Alfie Kohn points out that the educational systems have become obsessed, trying to invent grading and reward systems instead of engaging students or cultivating their curiosity^[4] (Kohn, A., 1993). In this process, teachers have forgotten that it is their job to upgrade their students' natural curiosity instinct and create the ideal conditions for this curiosity to be sparked. Of course, nobody will ever question the existence of grading or evaluation systems, and most probably, they will continue existing for many years. However, when there is even a tiny suspicion that assessment may overshadow learning, educators must reframe how important they think grades might be.

Alfie Kohn also points out that:

- Grades undermine students' interest in learning ^[4](Kohn, A., 1993).
- Tests lead students to try to avoid challenging tasks. If they have an opportunity, they will pick the shortest book or the most familiar topic, not because they are lazy but because the system has made them respond rationally to an irrational demand. If the purpose is to get an A, then it is more than evident that students will try to find the easiest way to do that ^[4] (Kohn, A., 1993).
- Students start thinking in a shallow, superficial way about their studying. Their way of studying or the items to study are usually affected by phrases they might use as a filter, for example, "Do we have to know this? Will this be on the test?" ^[4](Kohn, A., 1993).

So, as teachers, we should always remember that the fact that we have a grading system, and the fact that we have students who achieve high grades, is not always a prerequisite for motivation.

Sometimes it can impede the natural, spontaneous, voluntary impulse for learning that we all have innately as humans.

Teachers should consider grades as a source of motivation rather than a source that may not work towards this conducive goal. Grades can help students study more and perform better. Still, they may also cause a lot of stress, disappointment, reluctance to continue studies due to pressure, and above all, make pursuing grades the primary goal of education instead of learning.

Learning is a natural-born human characteristic. As educators, we need to be careful so that pursuing any grades will never impede this natural trait. Students who get fully absorbed in achieving high grades may quickly lose motivation.

The Curse of Knowledge

We all enjoy speaking eloquently, establishing a solid connection with our students, and sometimes, without realising it, showcasing our knowledge and expertise by incorporating complex ideas and references into our lectures. In other words, we want to demonstrate that "we know what we are talking about." However, this behaviour falls under the "Curse of Knowledge" ^[3](Heath, C., & Heath, D. 2007), which means that we may be so absorbed in our knowledge that we overlook whether our students are learning or not.

We may recall a teacher from our past who frequently did this, or perhaps we have fallen prey to this behaviour. Nevertheless, even though we know the material, can present it efficiently, and deliver a



compelling lecture, our students still need to understand it. Our demonstration of expertise may cast a "message of dark motivation" in the classroom.

"In 1990, a Stanford University graduate student in psychology, Elizabeth Newton, illustrated the Curse of Knowledge by conducting a simple game in which she assigned people to two roles: "tapper" or "listener." The tapper picked a well-known song and tapped out the rhythm on a table while the listener guessed the song. Listeners correctly guessed only three of the 120 songs: a success ratio of 2.5%. Before they guessed, Newton asked the tappers to predict the probability that listeners would guess correctly, and they predicted 50%. The tappers believed they had successfully conveyed their message, but in reality, they only succeeded once in 40 attempts." [7](Harvard Business Review, 2006).

As educators, managers, coaches, or presenters, we may mistakenly assume that our message has reached its intended audience once we have explained something efficiently. We may think we have done our job well and covered "the lesson of the day." We may even assume that everyone has understood what we have said because we have explained it clearly.

However, imagine how discouraging it would be for a student who has not understood the teacher's lecture. They might be intimidated to ask questions or seek further clarifications because of the "fascinating performance of your expertise." What if, for various reasons, the teachers believed that they understood, but nobody did?

That is why it is crucial to ask for feedback, break up the lectures into smaller segments, and always ensure everyone understands what the teacher is saying.

School classrooms differ from university lecture halls, and students may need to hear a concept multiple times or in different examples, regardless of how well the teacher knows it. Teachers may possess exceptional knowledge and performance, but more is needed to guarantee that the students will understand the lesson's lectures immediately.

Teachers should adopt a more humble approach and acknowledge that there might be cases during which the "Curse of Knowledge" may not create a conducive environment for learning.

"The Sisyphean Condition"

In Greek mythology, Sisyphus was punished by the Gods with an eternal task for his sins. He had to repeatedly push a rock up a hill, only for it to roll back down each time he reached the top. Sisyphus was condemned to perform this futile and exhausting task for all eternity.

When we first encounter the story of Sisyphus, we might think that the "actual act of torture" is the strenuous effort that he has to put in to complete this painful task. Therefore, Sisyphus is likely punished because he cannot rest and must keep performing this arduous task.

However, in his book "Pay Off: The Hidden Logic that Pays Our Motivation," Dan Ariely offers another perspective on interpreting the "Sisyphus torture." Ariely argues that it is not just the effort, labor, and exhaustion that Sisyphus has to endure to perform the task but there is another "element of torture" in the cyclical repetition of the task. [1] (Ariely, D., & Trower, M. R., 2016) Sisyphus performs the task repeatedly without any goal or meaning. In other words, Sisyphus works hard and gives his best, but his effort yields neither results nor progress and, therefore, has no meaning. [6] (Ariely, D., Kamenica, E., & Prelec, D., 2008)

Let us imagine a classroom where the teacher performs at their best (like in the Curse of Knowledge condition). The teacher has covered all the required materials, the classroom is disciplined, and everyone appears happy. The teacher receives top marks from their superiors, and no "torture" is involved. The task seems accomplished, and all the boxes have been "ticked." One could easily claim that this teacher has done an excellent job.

However, using Ariely's perspective, finding meaning in all the performance, energy, and effort that the teacher described in the previous paragraph might be challenging. It is true that the educator "has done their job," but is this effort enough to give some meaning to the lesson for the students?

The impression that performing our tasks efficiently, patiently, successfully, and according to the rules (just like Sisyphus) automatically equals motivation, meaning, and satisfaction for our students might make us form the wrong perception about our performance. We might think that this is enough or that this makes us a "good teacher," but a good teacher cannot be assessed only by that principle. A good teacher can give meaning to their lesson, or at least try to find the meaning that the students need, and make this goal the main objective of their teaching. Otherwise, he might be performing the same Sisyphean cyclical working patterns futilely.

Finally, the "Sisyphean Condition" is another example of an everyday situation in that motivation cannot be procured or generated.



Social Pain Equals Physical Pain

Have we ever wondered where the common expression "my heart is broken" come from? Is the meaning of this phrase purely metaphorical, or does it include a literal meaning?

Matthew Lieberman proved that this phrase was not formed accidentally and had a literal meaning. With his wife Naomi Eisenberger, after many years of research and conducting social experiments, they proved that the painful effects of social and psychological rejection are more than just a metaphor. In other words, when we feel socially or emotionally rejected or hurt, the pain we feel is identical to the pain we feel when we break our leg or hand. Furthermore, the two neuroscientists proved that in the case of social pain, the same regions of our brains are activated when we experience physical pain [5](Lieberman, 2013).

We can all realise the tremendous responsibility these findings create for any educator in a classroom context. Teachers need to be aware that one single word, one phrase, a derogatory tone of voice, or even a bad mood may create similar negative feelings in their students. The cases during a lesson in a school classroom in which a similar activation of "painful neurons" may occur in someone's brain might be numerous. We, as teachers, sometimes fail to realise the effect our words may have on our students, even subconsciously. Kindness, respect, mutual rules of conduct, and mindfulness can be a safety net for educators to avoid causing "social pain."

If a teacher falls into the trap of "social pain," it will be complicated for them to create any motivation framework or try to spark similar conducive feelings. So it is not that frameworks of demotivation will be automatically generated, but that motivational attitudes will find it hard to be cultivated, which is a situation that none of us wants in our classes.

References:

[1] Ariely, D., & Trower, M. R. (2016). Payoff: The hidden logic that shapes our motivations (First TED books hardcover). TED Books/Simon & Schuster.

[2] Dörnyei, Z., & Hadfield, J. (2013). Motivating Learning. Routledge.

[3] Heath, C., & Heath, D. (2007). Made to Stick: Why Some Ideas Survive and Others Die. Random House.

[4] Kohn, A. (1993). Punished by rewards: The trouble with gold stars, incentive plans, A's, praise, and other bribes. Houghton, Mifflin and Company.

[5] Lieberman, M. D. (2013). Social: Why Our Brains Are Wired to Connect. Crown Publishing Group.

[6] Ariely, D., Kamenica, E., & Prelec, D. (2008). Man's search for meaning: The case of Legos. Journal of Economic Behavior & Organization, 67(3-4), 671-677.

[7] Harvard Business Review. (2006, December). The curse of knowledge. Harvard Business Review. <https://hbr.org/2006/12/the-curse-of-knowledge>