Edmodo as a Motivation and Inclusion Tool in the Foreign Language Classroom

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Abstract

Adults nowadays are expected to create their own learning path, find Personal Learning Networks, collaborate with others and be digitally literate. Learning a foreign language is part of the array of stimulating lifelong learning experiences that adults can enjoy, and many men and women feel the need to start of improve their foreign language proficiency. In order for adults to compromise with their learning, their unique characteristics need to be understood. Adults bring to the classroom their previous knowledge and experiences, interests and skills. They also bring in their lifestyle. Language classrooms need to reflect their reality and make use of instruments that enhance the learning experience both for teachers and students.
One very useful tool taht can be used as a bridge between real and classroom life is Edmodo. Its interface mirrors that of a social network, but in fact this is a powerful web-based educational platform. It requires an internet connection and code provided by the owner of the group. The student will enter an environment which will let them feel

1) included: all members of the group can post, upload and receive content. The shier students feel safe and the most outgoing have a forum where they can put their feelings into words.
2) motivated: members of the group can interact in one common area, receive feedback and keep updated on the class news.
3) meaningful: students are allowed to be part of a community in which they can make decisions.
4) competent: assessment is continuous and feedback timely and easy to send for teachers.

Edmodo has proved to be an excellent tool to communicate with students but also to make technology part of our teaching/learning experience. It has also served as a leveraging tool for groups where there were different economic, cultural, social and educational backgrounds because one just needs a phone, tablet or computer and the human need to connect and communicate their needs and desires.

"There are no magic motivational buttons to force people to learn, work hard and act responsibly."

(Martin Ford, 1992:202)

Motivation and inclusion for the adult learner, especially in a foreign language classroom, is crucial for their learning experience to be effective and satisfactory. Introducing tools like Edmodo contributes to these two goals.

As learners and teachers, we know how relevant motivation is in the learning process. Little can an attractive programme, excellent instructors or personalised tasks do if the individual lacks motivation. If we try to remember the last time we tried to learn something new, we will probably remember what the reason was and if the outcome was positive or negative. We may also remember if we really cared, if our emotions were involved, and if we thought we were capable of achieving that goal, that is, if our personality was allowing for success to happen.

Motivation has been investigated by many and in many different areas. In fact, there are varied situations where someone wants to infuse in somebody else the need to do something: schools, sports, army, politics, marketing. In my job as a teacher of English for adult learners I find myself trying to motivate my students differently in different times of the year and I always wonder what really makes them come to class three times a week, what makes them take an exam which may give them nightmares for months to come. I also wonder what makes people with serious health conditions come to class: someone whose neurodegenerative disease has left her speech damaged or someone with a mental health problem or someone who is thirty years older than their classmates. I struggle to find ways to make them feel part of a community and find their learning experience pleasurable.

Teaching adults requires an understanding of their unique characteristics. Adults want to be in control of what, who, how, why, when and where they are learning. They compromise with their own learning when they think the goals are realistic and important for their personal or professional needs. They can´t be passive subjects and if they are, the initial interest in learning is lost. Adults are no different when it comes to the biological learning mechanisms, but the efficiency of those mechanisms varies

with age. Social, emotional and past experiences have an influence on our brain efficiency and also on the student´s motivation. If those elements are more developed in adults than in children, it can be easily deduced that the former will be more relevant than the latter.   These four elements: emotions, feedback, previous experiences and meaning are connected and are related to one another. The learning experience should aim to answer the need that an adult feels to relate that which they are learning with their own selves. The adult learner wants to be considered as a unique being and the teacher can achieve this goal through communication and respect.

Once we know the significance that motivation has on the student´s performance and the substantial role the teacher plays, we need to identify the level of motivation that those students bring to the classroom. To answer this question I will follow the explanations that Raymond J. Wlodvosky offers in his great work: *Enhancing Adult Motivation to Learn.* Wlodvosky (2001) finds three levels of motivation:

1) low: success+will: the student has a voice but no say on what he is learning
2) average: success+will+value: students find meaning and value in learning
3) high: success+will+value+enjoyment :not only do students enjoy learning in the classroom, but also participating and compromising.

Undoubtedly, teachers will always aspire to work with students whose level of motivation is the highest possible. Where are these students? Perhaps we have them in the classroom and just need some support to reach that level three of motivation. Teachers first need to analyse which features characterise this type of students and then work with those techniques that are proven to act as stimulus . We can find some support in the main tenet of socioconstructivism: formal learning is directly influenced by collaboration, social context and negotiation. It is crucial to understand that people learn through interaction with and suppport from other persons and objects in the world. It can be deduced that teachers can use strategies that foster motivation: create or stimulate a condition, a mental or emotional state where the student wants to achieve information, knowledge and ability, wants to know more or wants to do something better.

Teachers should develop their competencies taking into account the following four basic principles:

1) Inclusion: Adult learners are no different from younger learners in their need to bond to one another. For this inclusive principle to be achieved, the role played by the teacher is essential, because they play a pivotal role in creating a positive environment where good work can flourish. In order to foster engaging collaborative work, each student needs to feel that their contributions are worthwhile and purposeful.
2) Attitude: It has a powerful impact on human behaviour. We have "mirror neurons", which are activated when we execute an action or when someone else is executing it. Mirror neurons make it possible for us to understand emotional states in others, that is, feeling empathy. When we see someone feel fear, joy, sadness, we undergo the same emotion. If our mirror neurons don´t work properly, we are unable to empathise or feel compassion for others. The attitude we feel before and during a learning experience plays a crucial role in the quality of retention of that we want to learn.
3) Meaning: When there is something the adult learner doesn´t find meaningful or relevant, the necessary cognitive and emotinal connections are not generated. Also, if something is too easy, it is seen as boring and if it´s too hard, unachievable. Adult learners want that which is interesting and applicable to our world. Teachers should remember that for learning to occur, neuronal networks must be deep enough, so learning through debate, bonding with others and building our own space is important for learning to take place.
4) Competence: when an adult learner achieves a certain level of competence, they achieve a higher self-esteem and it is precisely this confidence that encourages them to aim at higher goals. Adult learners set their projects and work to complete them successfully. Just like younger learners, they need timely and effective feedback in order to decide on their next course of action.

We can summarise these four factors which are indispensable to foster motivation in the classroom as follows:

• Creating an environment where learners feel respected and connected to one another
• Creating a favourable disposition to learning
• Creating challenging experiences
• Searching for ways to give each student personalised feedback

Unfortunately, there are too many days when we are not happy with the learning environment that has been created. Context (Chapman 2007) plays a crucial role in this situation. Feeling safe and comfortable in any learning situation is essential for the student to wish to play an active role in it.

Chapman states that the student should feel independent and own this situation. In the official school of languages in Spain both the previous four factors and the context need to be taken into account when designing engaging and effective learning experiences.

Should we agree with the 50-50 rule (Adair, Kogan, Page, 2006), which maintains that the degree of motivation one can find in others is only 50%, thus leaving only 50% for the instructors, it is clear that the "power" of the teacher is limited. Despite this seemingly small percentage that instruction can control, there are certain principles that we can adopt like designing a motivating environment where

- Tasks and materials are varied
- Students have constant updated feedback about their progress
- Students are treated as individuals
- Rewards are valuable for students
- Teachers are leaders, showing motivation and inspiring students to be motivated as well

ICT offers us teachers a myriad of possibilities to encourage students to reach their maximum potential. There are also tools that help us create environments where students feel respected and appreciated. In this paper I am describing my experience with Edmodo.

This web-based educational platform is a safe haven for interaction and collaboration and complements face-to-face instruction. It was created in 2008 by Jeff O´Hara and Nic Borg. Edmodo lets us offer our students a private and safe environment. It is very simple to join and use. Its similarity to Facebook makes it extremely friendly for students. Just like Facebook, it has an area where all participants can post, interact and upload files. There is no program to be installed and access is immediate: a teacher creates a group, obtains a code and shares this code with students. Each student joins their Edmodo with the code and a personal password. No email account is necessary and for younger children there is an extra code for parents to join their children´s group.

How can Edmodo let us develop the four basic principles we have described?

Inclusion:

- Students and teachers have a profile to complete with their names, pictures, learning styles.
- Students and teachers can post. As a teacher I can post about topics that are interesting enough for the shier or introverted to intervene.
- RSS feeds can be used at weekends for those students who always say their weekends are boring. They can be asked to comment on the most surprising piece of news for instance.
- Edmodo breaks the walls: it has mobile apps for Android, Iphones and tablets. Regardless of how well connected the area where we live is, we have access to our virtual classroom. In rural areas, this is a major factor that makes Edmodo an inclusive tool.

Attitude:

- Edmodo offers a very simple system to reward students with badges. These badges can be customised for our students. Unsurprisingly, adults enjoy badges just like younger learners.

Meaning:

- Brody (2004) states that the most motivating tasks will be those students consider more relevant and meaningful in their lives. Edmodo lets us propose activities that require critical thinking. It also allows us to make polls to gauge satisfaction levels, opinions about activities, decisions about dates, etc.

Competence:

- Students´ progress can be evaluated by means of easy to assemble quizzes: multiple choice, fill in the blanks, matching. These quizzes can be a tool for self-assessment but also let the teacher know the progress of a whole group.

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