



## Enhancing Students' Learning Motivation in ESP Course Instruction

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### Abstract

*The target goal of the current paper is to thoroughly analyze and introduce the characteristics of enhancing students' learning motivation in the acquisition of "English for Specific Purposes". Learners in the ESP classes are generally aware of the purposes for which they will need to use English. Having already oriented their education toward a specific field, they see their English training as complementing this orientation. Knowledge of the subject area enables the students to identify a real context for the vocabulary and structures of the ESP classroom. In such way, the learners can take advantage of what they already know about the subject matter to learn. An ESP program is therefore built on the assessment of purposes and needs and the functions for which English is required. As a matter of fact, ESP combines subject matter and English language teaching. Such a combination is highly motivating because students are able to apply what they learn in their English classes to their main field of study. Being able to use the vocabulary and structures that they learn in a meaningful context reinforces what is taught and increases their motivation. The students' abilities in their subject-matter fields, in turn, improve their ability to acquire English. Students approach the study of English through a field that is already known and relevant to them. This means that they are able to use what they learn in the ESP classroom right away in their work and studies. Thus, in ESP, English should be presented not as a subject to be learned in isolation from real use, nor as a mechanical skill or habit to be developed. On the contrary, English should be presented in authentic contexts to make the learners acquainted with the particular ways in which the language is used in functions that they will need to perform in their fields of specialty or jobs.*

**Keywords:** *ESP, learning motivation, language acquisition*

Motivation has a great impact on the learning process. While some people learn more by outside influences, others may achieve more by their personal aspirations. Whatever the situation, everyone involved in any learning process should know how motivation affects learning. For teachers, a lack of motivation has long been one of the most frustrating obstacles to student learning. While the concept of motivation may intuitively seem fairly simple, a rich research literature has developed as researchers have defined this concept in a number of ways.

Social scientists and psychologists have approached the problem of motivation from a variety of different angles, and education researchers have adapted many of these ideas into the school context. While there is a great deal of overlap between motivation theories, researchers differ in their identification of the underlying belief systems leading to motivational variation. Some theorists emphasize belief in oneself and one's competency, others prioritize goal orientation, and a third group argues that the difficulty of the task shapes individual motivation.

In the current paper our aim is to provide an introduction to various theories of motivation, explain the importance of motivation for learning, and outline several practical strategies that ESP teachers can use to support and promote student motivation in ESP course instruction.

Of a fair number of existing researches, we would like to highlight four major theories of motivation. Attribution theory suggests that our actions are the result of making sense of our environment, the search for causes to perceptions, feelings and events creates a behavioral dynamic of socially constructed reality.

As Wilson suggests, motivation is the term to explain why we act in certain behavioral patterns at given times, and is a "force which starts and sustains our activities towards goal achieving" [6]. Motivation has both intrinsic and extrinsic causations and is often predicted on a mixture of self-determined and environmental conditions. Consequently, there is a distinction between performance approach goals and performance avoidance goals. Performance approach goals refer to orientation toward demonstrating high ability whereas performance avoidance goals refer to orientation towards demonstrating low ability. If a performance orientated student has high motivation without an internal



interest, then it is more likely for them to adopt approaches to learning that are “surficial”. This emphasizes the need in some learning situations for intrinsic goal setting rather than over-reliance on external goal setting. Surface learning is thought to be a characteristic of ‘performance avoidance’ students; whereas ‘performance approach’ students adopt a more strategic approach to learning in which intellectual achievement is valued and obligations are intended to be fulfilled.

In comparison, expectancy value theory suggests that the amount of motivation or effort for a task is dependent on the expectant value of success. The fact that individuals calibrate themselves or set goals based on interpretations of past achievements is the basis for self-efficacy theory. Fourthly, goal orientations explain how we view success give orientation toward a particular activity [6]. The mastery of goal expectation is based on a desire for increased understanding which is more likely to occur in learning environments in which students receive sufficient feedback in response to learned competencies.

As Deci suggests, “Deadlines, imposed goals, surveillance and evaluations undermine intrinsic motivation. People experience them as being antagonistic to their autonomy, so these events drain people’s sense of enthusiasm and interest in controlled activities” [1].

In the education context overly-controlling behavior is thought to reduce choice, diminish autonomy and if applied in too rigid an environment, leads to reduced motivation. However, if such controls are delivered in such a way to make them appealing, with corresponding intrinsic and extrinsic rewards, learners may feel more motivated to accomplish them.

Thus, motivational values such as desire to learn, personal incentives (intrinsic and extrinsic) and striving for excellence may be affected from such conditions as: interest, learning from others, taking responsibility for learning, intrinsic and extrinsic task and social rewards [7]. Moreover, instructors who maintain highly structured, organized and outcome-focused lessons are more likely to inspire motivational learning confidence in students.

People learn languages when they have opportunities to understand and work with language in a context that they comprehend and find interesting. In this view, ESP is a powerful means for such opportunities. Students will acquire English as they work with materials which they find interesting and relevant and which they can use in their professional work or further studies. The more learners pay attention to the meaning of the language they hear or read, the more they are successful; the more they have to focus on the linguistic input or isolated language structures, the less they are motivated to attend their classes. Thus, in contrast to a General English teacher, the ESP teacher is faced by a group of learners with certain expectations as to the nature, content and achievement of the course. The learners come to the ESP class with a specific interest for learning, subject matter knowledge, and well-built adult learning strategies. They are in charge of developing English language skills to reflect their native-language knowledge and skills.

As learners, the ESP students are usually adults who already have some acquaintance with English and are learning the language in order to communicate a set of professional skills and to perform particular job-related functions. An ESP program is therefore built on the assessment of purposes and needs and the functions for which English is required. From this viewpoint, we can make a basic distinction between ESP learners’ **target needs** (i.e. what the learner needs to do in the target situation) and **learning needs** (i.e. what the learner needs to do in order to learn). ‘Target needs’ is something of an umbrella term, which in practice hides a number of important distinctions. It is more useful to look at the target situation in terms of **necessities, lacks and wants** [3].

We can call **'necessities'** the type of need determined by the demands of the target situation, that is, what the learner has to know in order to function effectively in the target situation. For example, a businessman or -woman might need to understand business letters, to communicate effectively at sales conferences, to get the necessary information from sales catalogues and so on. He or she will presumably also need to know the linguistic features - discourse, functional, structural, and lexical - which are commonly used in the situations identified. This information is relatively easy to gather. It is a matter of observing what situations the learner will need to function in and then analyzing the constituent parts of them.

To identify necessities alone, however, is not enough since the concern in ESP is with the needs of particular learners. You also need to know what the learner knows already, so that you can then decide which of the necessities the learner **lacks**. One target situation necessity might be to read texts in a particular subject area. Whether or not the learners need instruction in doing this will depend on how well they can do it already. The target proficiency in other words, needs to be matched against the existing proficiency of the learners. The gap between the two can be referred to as the **learner's lacks**.



We have stressed above that it is an awareness of need that characterizes the ESP situation. But awareness is a matter of perception, and perception may vary according to one's standpoint. Learners may well have a clear idea of the 'necessities' of the target situation: they will certainly have a view as to their 'lacks'. But it is quite possible that the learners' views will conflict with the perceptions of other interested parties: course designers, sponsors, and teachers.

Bearing in mind the importance of learner motivation in the learning process, learner perceived **wants** cannot be ignored. What this means in practical terms is well illustrated by Richard Mead's (1980) account of his research into the motivation of students following ESP courses in the faculties of Medicine, Agriculture and Veterinary Science at a university in the Middle East.

The students were all given ESP courses based on texts from their subject specialties: Medical texts for the Medical students and so on. This, it was assumed, would motivate the students because of the apparent relevance to their course of study. When Mead enquired into the interest the students had in their specialties, however, he discovered that only the Medical students were really motivated by their subject-specific texts. The Agriculture and Veterinary students were not motivated by their subject-specific texts, because they didn't really want to study those subjects. They had wanted to be medical doctors, but there were not enough places in the medical faculty to accommodate them all. They had opted for their specialties as very poor second bests. Agricultural and Veterinary texts, therefore, were like salt in a wound. They had a de-motivating effect, because they reminded the students of their frustrated ambitions. We might represent the necessities, lacks and wants in Mead's analysis as in figure given below [3]:

	OBJECTIVE: as perceived by course designers	SUBJECTIVE: as perceived by learners
NECESSITIES	The English needed for success in Agricultural or Veterinary Studies	To reluctantly cope with a 'second-best' situation
LACKS	(Presumably) areas of English needed for Agricultural or Veterinary Studies	Means of doing Medical Studies
WANTS	To succeed in Agricultural or Veterinary Studies	To undertake Medical Studies

Fig. 1

It can be seen from this analysis that objective and subjective views of needs can, and do, conflict, with a consequent de-stabilizing effect on motivation. What should the teacher do in such a situation? There can be no clear-cut answers. Each situation must be judged according to the particular circumstances. What is important is that the ESP course designer or teacher is aware of such differences and takes account of them in materials and methodology. There is little point in taking an ESP approach, which is based on the principle of learner involvement, and then ignoring the learners' wishes and views.

As for the subject-specificity of the ESP course, so, in the ESP class, students are shown how the subject-matter content is expressed in English. The teacher can make the most of the students' knowledge of the subject matter, thus helping them learn English faster. The students' abilities in their subject-matter fields, in turn, improve their ability to acquire English. Subject-matter knowledge gives them the context they need to understand the English of the classroom. Thus, the ESP students are particularly well disposed to focus on meaning in the subject-matter field. Students approach the study of English through a field that is already known and relevant to them. This means that they are able to use what they learn in the ESP classroom right away in their work and studies.

From the ESP teacher's perspective, it is important to note that the ESP teachers are supposed to go beyond the first stage of Needs Analysis: Target Situation Analysis which identifies key target events, skills and texts - to observe as far as possible the situations in which students use the identified skills, and analyze samples of the identified texts. As part of this process, ESP teachers generally need to be able to carry out research to understand the discourse of the texts that students use.

In another case, it is essential that the teacher adopts the stance of the consultant, when teaching a much more specific course. A consultant who has knowledge of communication practices, but needs to 'negotiate' with the students on how best to exploit these practices to meet the objectives they have. The relationship is much more one of partnership. In specific ESP teaching it may be the



learner who asks the questions and the teacher who responds. This role is a difficult one to adopt for any teacher, especially an inexperienced one. In many cultures it is a role that is alien to traditional views of the role of the teacher. However, where it is possible, it is a role that is very appropriate and productive with sophisticated learners who have a clear and specific set of purposes. Thus, the institutional and cultural expectations of the learners must be taken into account. One group of learners may welcome the teacher's adoption of a facilitator role; another may find it completely alien; but this does not mean that attitudes cannot change or be changed.

All in all, ESP teachers do not need to master specialist subject knowledge. They require three things only:

- a positive attitude towards the ESP content;
- a knowledge of the fundamental principles of the subject area;
- an awareness of how much they probably already know [3].

This can be summed up as 'the ability to ask intelligent questions'. Many ESP teachers are surprised at how much knowledge of the subject matter they 'pick up' by teaching the materials or talking to students.

On top of that, sometimes the ESP teacher may also have to negotiate in a more physical sense. Cramped classrooms often in inconvenient locations, badly ventilated or heated, with a great deal of outside noise, are only too common. Equally, the teaching may take place in workshops or on the factory 'shop floor', or on the premises of businesses and other concerns, often without such basic classroom 'apparatus' as a blackboard. The role ESP teachers are called on to play here is obviously one of adaptability and flexibility. They need to be prepared to accept such conditions as to some extent inevitable, to strive to improvise while also patiently campaigning for improvements with the sponsors.

Furthermore, in ESP, English should be presented not as a subject to be learned in isolation from real use, nor as a mechanical skill or habit to be developed. On the contrary, English should be presented in authentic contexts to make the learners acquainted with the particular ways in which the language is used in functions that they will need to perform in their fields of specialty or jobs. To stimulate and motivate, materials need to be challenging yet achievable; to offer new ideas and information whilst being grounded in the learners' experience and knowledge; to encourage fun and creativity. The input must contain concepts and/or knowledge that are familiar but it must also offer something new, a reason to communicate, to get involved. The exploitation needs to match how the input would be used outside the learning situation and take account of language learning needs. The purpose and the connection to the learners' reality need to be clear. All this places high demands on the materials and great pressure on materials writers. Not surprisingly, producing good learning material gobbles up hours of preparation time. Each stage of finding suitable carrier content, matching real content to learning and real world activities, planning an effective layout, is time-consuming. Preparing new materials from scratch for every course taught is clearly impractical, even if every teacher actually had the ability. What all ESP practitioners have to be is good providers of materials. A good provider of materials will be able to:

- select appropriately from what is available;
- be creative with what is available;
- modify activities to suit learners' needs and
- supplement by providing extra activities (and extra input).

The balance between these will vary from course to course, situation to situation. Initial questions to ask when selecting materials include:

- Will the materials stimulate and motivate?
- To what extent does the material match the stated learning objectives and your learning objectives? (It is rare for a single set of published material to match the exact learning needs of any one ESP learner group; and activities do not always meet the stated objectives.)
- To what extent will the materials support that learning [3]?

Very often it is not a whole book we need to evaluate but a unit or just an activity. Identifying and separating the real content (exploited and exploitable) and the carrier content of particular activities is crucial to this process. The carrier content must be appropriate and the real content must match the course objectives. In our experience, the only way to check this is to 'be a student' and do the activities, thinking carefully about what we are actually having to do to complete them successfully.

There is no black-and-white dividing line between modifying materials, supplementing with extra input and activities, and preparing materials from scratch. In each case it is a question of degree and





perspective. The ESP teacher is mainly a provider of materials - selecting material that is available, adapting it as necessary and supplementing it where it does not quite meet the learners' needs - although in some cases it is more appropriate to use the authentic materials that learners can provide. Learner-generated materials can provide both carrier content and activities. Another way in which learners can provide carrier content is through framework materials. Thus, preparing materials benefits from a co-operative effort because the exchange of ideas, availability of different abilities and strengths, and piloting that can take place are invaluable for the quality of the final material.

When the real and carrier content are matched, the next stage is to draft activities. The likely resources, group sizes, approaches to learning and target activities must be considered when selecting activities so that they are appropriate for the learning environment.

**To conclude**, in ESP the learners are not primarily language learners; they are or have been learners of other disciplines and this has to be a major consideration in the devising and delivering of a course. To maximize learning means activating all existing learning strategies. In this regard, variety is essential in any language class, but we feel that it is particularly important in an ESP class as there is sometimes the danger of the ESP class becoming rather a dry affair that fails to motivate learners. We need to practice a number of micro-skills in one class, we need to introduce a range of activity types and we need to vary the type of interaction taking place during the class. The ESP focal point is that English is not taught as a subject separated from the students' real world (or wishes); instead, it is integrated into a subject matter area important to the learners. Thus, the ESP course combines subject matter and English language teaching. Such a combination is highly motivating because students are able to apply what they learn in their English classes to their main field of study, whether it be accounting, business management, economics, computer science or tourism. Being able to use the vocabulary and structures that they learn in a meaningful context reinforces what is taught and increases their motivation.

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