

how to ... motivate higher level learners

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1 Problems of motivating higher level learners

think!¹

Motivation can suffer at any time, but can you think of at least two reasons why many learners experience a dip in motivation as they reach upper-intermediate level? Note them down and then read on.

The early stages of learning can be an anxious time in some ways, but most learners have the satisfaction of being able to see their progress from one week to the next. It may be the ability to use the past tense to talk about past experience, or to understand a dialogue in natural spoken English, or to make sense of a restaurant menu that was previously incomprehensible. Such obvious signs of progress are very rewarding and extremely motivating. As learners pass through the intermediate level, their situation changes.

- Progress is not evident in the same way. The giant strides of the early stages are replaced by steps which seem to become ever smaller, until they are hardly visible at all. The learner has now reached a kind of 'plateau'. Progress may still be taking place, but the learners' inability to see it can have a very detrimental effect on their motivation.
- Complacency can also become a problem at this level. Some learners are strongly motivated by their rapid progress and desire to overcome problems in the early stages of learning, but by upper-intermediate level, they are able to express most of their everyday needs, and their urgency and desire begin to evaporate. As motivation flags, progress slows down, with the result that motivation drops even more. They are caught in a downward spiral.
- Some learners at this level suffer from classroom fatigue. They have now worked their way through various levels and coursebooks, and classroom procedures have become routine: the lessons are predictable, the activities are all familiar, the faces are the same. Even the syllabus looks repetitive. In fact, it isn't, but much of the grammar at upper-intermediate level includes headings that are already familiar to any learner who has used an intermediate coursebook: present perfect, past perfect, conditionals, passives, reported speech, and so on. What's new?
- Finally, there is the issue of needs and wants. At lower levels, there is usually a shared belief among learners that they need to cover the basic grammar of the language, learn common high frequency lexis, and devote time to the

unfamiliar sounds of a new language so that they are at least intelligible to those around them. Once these basic needs have been met, however, groups may become more disparate. Some will still be driven by a desire to study the grammar, while others may wish to concentrate only on improving their spoken fluency. Some learners want more writing, and often specific kinds of writing, while for others it is irrelevant. Faced with these different needs and wants, most teachers accept there has to be a degree of compromise. Most learners accept it too, but a few find it difficult to sustain motivation if the lesson is not perceived as directly relevant to their needs.

We must stress that dips in motivation do not affect all learners, and neither do they affect all groups. For some learners, their intrinsic motivation carries them through; and for others, motivation can be sustained by external examinations such as Cambridge First Certificate. In any case, for many of those affected, the loss of motivation is both temporary and reversible. It is important, however, that we are prepared for it when it happens, and have measures to combat it. The rest of the chapter looks at a few of these strategies.

2 Helping learners to see their progress

Although many learners reach a kind of 'plateau' where they feel they aren't making progress, this is not necessarily the case. Sometimes, it is simply that progress is less obvious and more subtle; it is best described perhaps as horizontal rather than vertical. Learners continue to expand their vocabulary, they continue to develop different skills such as reading and writing, and they usually make incremental improvements in both accuracy and fluency. But much of this is hard to see and measure, and doesn't replace the thrill of suddenly being able to say something that was previously impossible, or understand something that was previously incomprehensible.

feedback

If progress is not so readily apparent at this level, one of your roles must be to make it apparent; and one way of doing this is through continuous and constructive feedback. At the end of any significant pair or group work activity, tell learners what they have done well, but also what they could improve on next time. This might be their use of language (grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation), how well they participated, how clearly they expressed their ideas, how well they interacted with and involved each other in the activity, etc. Very often feedback is seen as being identical with correction, i.e. telling people what they got wrong. However, most people are motivated by positive feedback, and if it is important for learners to see their progress, then it is clearly important for them to be aware of what they are doing right. In addition, if you begin with positive feedback, you create a climate in which constructive correction can be more readily accepted.

It is worth remembering that some activities deserve to be repeated, following feedback. It may not be appropriate to do it again immediately – there is the fatigue and familiarity factor to

take into account – but many groups appreciate the opportunity to try an activity again, possibly in a slightly different form, and some will become aware they are improving second time around.

tutorials

One potential drawback with class feedback is that much of it may be in response to the contribution of the more vocal minority during activities. To balance this, you could try to organize **individual tutorials** with everyone in the class, at times in the lesson when the rest of the group are working individually or in pairs. Start with the learners who may get less of your attention in a normal lesson (in other words the less confident or less extrovert learners), and try to plan a timetable in which you can see each member of the group over a specific time period. Less extrovert learners will then have as much of your time as others, and on a one-to-one level may feel more confident in talking to you about their progress. An alternative to individual tutorials is to organize tutorials with pairs or groups of three. However you organize them, you should tell learners in advance, giving them time to think about issues they want to discuss.

Tutorials have other potential advantages:

- they can help you to meet the learners' needs more effectively
- they can give learners a stronger belief that you are interested in them and their progress
- they can give you an opportunity to explain what you are doing and why, and to answer their questions
- they can help to develop rapport
- they can help you to identify problems at an early stage, e.g. class dynamics, student dissatisfaction
- they give you feedback on your teaching.

On the debit side:

- they are very time-consuming
- they can be difficult to organize
- some learners are not used to this kind of one-to-one tutorial and may find it threatening
- you may hear things you don't want to hear
- you may set up expectations which are difficult to meet
- what you learn may give you more work!

try it out preparing for tutorials

If you are considering tutorials, it is a good idea to prepare a **questionnaire** for the learners to complete. This will force them to think about the tutorial in advance, and gives you a starting point for the conversation. The one below is designed as a pair work activity prior to a tutorial, but it could be done individually.

The course so far

With a partner, try to remember:

- the grammar points we've looked at
- the vocabulary areas we've looked at
- some different kinds of speaking activities we've done

Now individually, think of:

- something you enjoyed
- something you learned from another student
- something you didn't enjoy

Tell your partner.

What about you? Have you ...

- done enough English homework?
- used English as much as possible out of class?
- participated enough in class?
- tried to use what you've learned?

Look forward ...

- What would you like to do more of in class?
- What language areas do you need to practise more?
- How can you help yourself more?
- Any questions or worries?

Maggie Baigent, Bologna, Italy

try it out learner diaries

Ask learners to buy a little notebook. In it, they write a few thoughts on a regular basis. This could be at the end of each lesson, or each week, depending on how often their classes are. They should write personally to you, and they can write whatever they like:

- about their progress in English
- any queries they have about English
- how they feel in the class
- what they like / don't like doing in class
- what they are doing outside class to improve their English.

They don't need to write at great length, and you should not correct their English unless they specifically ask you to. Collect in these diaries regularly (take a few at a time, so that you don't have to respond to the whole class at once) and write in response to their comments and queries. These diaries can give you a great deal of insight and can enable you to help individuals where possible.

self-assessment

Learners can benefit a great deal from class feedback and individual tutorials, but they also need to develop the ability to **see progress for themselves**. We have tried to nurture this in **natural English** by getting learners to reflect on their own performance at the end of the **extended speaking** activities, e.g.

test yourself!

How well do you think you did the extended speaking? Mark the line.

0

10

Many learners will be unfamiliar with this form of self-assessment, especially on something as subjective as free speaking, but we hope that it will have a positive effect on progress. The exact nature of the scoring system is largely irrelevant; the important point is that it is clear and concrete, so learners have a system by which they can compare one performance with another.

3 Materials, activities, and approaches

interest and variety

Every teacher wants to feel that the materials and activities they use with their learners are going to be appropriate, engaging, and productive, but this is particularly true with higher level learners who through years of study may have become jaded with the same activities. There is certainly a challenge for you as a teacher: firstly, to capture your learners' interest and secondly, to keep their interest. Clearly, it is necessary to have

- variety of activity type
- variety of focus (from pair and group work to individual work, to class discussion, use of video, reading, etc.)
- variety of pace.

At a broader level, learners (and teachers) need variety both within the coursebook and beyond it. For instance, if you are exploiting your **student's book** in different ways, adapting it where necessary to your class's needs, using the suggestions from **ideas plus** in the **teacher's book** and creating your own ways of using the material, you can make your lessons more varied. Just as important, however, is to include lessons or parts of lessons where the coursebook is not used, and where you work from your learners' expressed interests and requests (more of this later, in the section on **topics and tasks** on p.157). You can provide variety and tailor the lessons to your class by making use of supplementary materials, topical authentic texts from newspapers, TV and radio, and of course, your own materials. Let us now look at ways of exploiting such texts.

think! ²

1 Read this summary of a text you are going to use with higher level learners. Can you think of three pre-reading and three post-reading activities which would be suitable for use with this text? Note them down, then read on.

Cupid Games

The text is about a TV documentary series in which single people who are looking for a partner are found potential 'blind dates' by family members or groups of friends. In one episode, Danny Kingsley, 39-year-old divorced father of two, agrees to let his father and eldest son choose a potential partner for him, and two of his friends also choose him a date. He goes on dates with each new partner and then gives his verdict on their choices.

2 Now look at these suggested pre-reading and post-reading activities.

Which do you think would best suit the text? Why?
Which would best suit your higher level learners? Why?
Which way(s) would you not normally use, but would be prepared to try?

Possible pre-reading activities

- a song related to the theme, e.g. *All by myself*
- a short video extract, e.g. *Blind Date*, a programme where people find a new partner. If there is a similar programme where you teach, you could use it with the sound turned down, and ask learners to imagine what the participants are saying.
- a vocabulary brainstorm on relationships, e.g. *a blind date, have sth in common*
- a short questionnaire about blind dates

Possible post-reading activities

- personalization, e.g. learners work in small groups and discuss the following: Which family members and friends would you nominate to find you a new partner? What kind of person would your family or friends choose for you? Who would choose the best partner, do you think?
- discussion, e.g. about arranged marriages or dating agencies
- role play, e.g. meeting someone on a blind date

a diagnostic approach

Given that higher level learners have different gaps in their knowledge, and that some learners feel that they have 'seen it all before', one strategy you can use is a diagnostic approach: learners complete an exercise or perform a task, and you observe how well they do it. What are they handling well? What are they making mistakes with? In response, you concentrate only on the language or skills that proved difficult, rather than assuming that everything is unknown. This approach can also help learners to see the difference between what they already know and what they still need to learn. Here are a few examples.

- Learners do a communication activity such as a **role play** (a job interview, for instance) with no pre-teaching. The teacher monitors and takes notes, or the role plays can be tape-recorded or video-recorded and analysed. The teacher then decides what needs to be learnt: vocabulary, greeting and welcoming interviewees, asking questions, taking turns, etc. He / she then teaches or revises the relevant areas in class, and learners do a parallel role play to see how they have progressed.
- Learners are given a short **diagnostic test** on a language point they have not fully grasped, e.g. *used to do* versus *be used to doing*. Gap-fills, spot the errors, complete the sentences, or sentence transformations can be used. As in the example above, the teacher goes over the exercise and takes the opportunity to teach or explain only the points which proved difficult for the class, rather than assuming that nothing is known.
- **Dictogloss / grammar dictation** (see intermediate **teacher's book**, p.146). A short text such as the advertisement in upper-intermediate **student's book** unit three p.37 would be suitable. As learners compare their version of the text with the original and perhaps find new language, or language used in unexpected ways, they are able to notice gaps in their knowledge.
- **Learner explanations**, e.g. learners are asked to explain the difference between pairs of items which differ in terms of structure, meaning, style, or pronunciation. This informs the teacher of any gaps in their knowledge, which can be filled in by other learners, or by you if necessary. At this level, learners have a wider range of language and are more proficient at defining, explaining, or paraphrasing. This not only sets learners a challenge, but values their contributions to the class. This strategy is particularly useful in this context where learners within each class have different gaps in their knowledge.

topics

Learners who have been studying English for years and have covered many of the basic topics such as holidays, work, health, etc. in their coursebooks may well feel reluctant to revisit these areas. It is therefore important at this level to find new topics or to find new angles on familiar topics. Above all, we recommend that you consult your learners on the topics they would like to explore.

think!³

You want to find out which topics your class are interested in. How could you do this? How could you use this information?

go to answer key p.159

Beyond the coursebook, you also have available to you a range of topical issues from the real world, which can be accessed via newspapers, the Internet, TV and radio, e.g. the World Service. Even if you cannot obtain a wide range of English language papers or programmes in monolingual contexts, there is news on the Internet, and cable TV is widespread. Even material in the learners' mother tongue can be used as a springboard.

tasks

- With language tasks, length and complexity can play a part in motivating higher level learners: extended speaking activities, discussions, role plays, and simulations all allow learners the time and opportunity to become absorbed in the activity and have a longer period of practice in English.
- Tasks often work well at this level when they are open-ended and provide the opportunity for learners to take things in their own direction. As a result, different groups will have different outcomes, and they will be more motivated to hear about each others' results. In our data for the *Nasty Neighbours* extended speaking activity, for instance, groups produced widely differing scenarios since they had chosen different characters from the photos, different locations, and different disputes. They were all very interested and often amused to hear each others' stories.

go to upper-intermediate **student's book**, p.100

- Finally, there is one way in which you can affect the degree of difficulty in activities: time pressure. If you give learners time to plan and rehearse an activity, it will be easier for them than if they have to do it in a spontaneous and unrehearsed fashion. To increase the level of challenge, give them less time to prepare.

learning through English

Learners at this level are often very motivated in class when they are learning facts and skills through the medium of a second language, for instance, reading or listening texts which give them facts or insights. Equally, peer presentations where learners talk about their jobs, hobbies, or anything else of interest may provide relevant and interesting input, and English simply becomes a channel for this. Our experience is that higher level learners are motivated to develop skills such as *how to give a good presentation* or *how to conduct a successful interview*, which can have benefits beyond the classroom.

This is an issue that you may wish to think about when you choose your own texts for classroom use: will the content tell your learners something new that will be interesting for them?

4 The role of the learner

consulting your learners

The extent to which teachers consult their learners on what they want or need to learn, and how they want to learn it, varies enormously. At higher levels, however, many teachers find that their learners have more divergent needs and they also have the ability to express them. Consequently, consultation tends to be more widespread. Learners may want more say in the choice of topics, but they may also wish to make clear the types of activities they prefer and how they want to spend the classroom time. This information can be gathered through informal discussion, individual or group questionnaires, and individual tutorials, as mentioned above. The information you receive will enable you to make adjustments to your timetable and your use of your coursebook; supplementing, rejecting, or adapting material where appropriate. You may decide to dedicate specific, regular class time to 'requests', either particular language points or skills in which learners express an interest. Indeed, if the language points are not too complicated, you could ask learners to research them, and 'present' them to the class. This may make the language points more memorable and provide a different focus.

project work

Many teachers like to involve upper-intermediate learners in project work; this can be extremely motivating when the focus of the project is well-chosen, and can encourage learners to use a range of skills. Producing a class website, a newsletter, or a video can be an excellent way to involve everyone, and because these activities have a clear outcome or product, they give a sense of achievement, not to mention something to show to their peers or family.

Want to know more? Read *Project Work*, Diana Fried-Booth (OUP).

English outside the classroom

In addition to learner involvement within the class, there is enormous potential at this level for learners to continue using English beyond the classroom. Training in the use of monolingual dictionaries in class time will enable and hopefully encourage learners to use dictionaries when they need them outside. They can also make use of the constantly growing sources of entertainment and information on TV and the Internet as well as in books, newspapers, and magazines.

try it out

My upper-intermediate class meets three times a week. At the beginning of the year, we had a lesson where we brainstormed the different sources of English outside class: films, TV, satellite TV, Internet websites, music, newspapers and magazines, etc. Learners then agreed that once a month, a lesson or part of a lesson would become a 'recommendations swapshop'. Each learner would briefly talk about something they had done in English that they would recommend to the group – an English-speaking film, a website, or whatever. Sometimes this is done as a mingling activity, and sometimes as a group discussion. Learners make a note of other people's recommendations to follow up themselves.

Hedda, Belgium

5 The language syllabus

At the upper-intermediate level, learners will meet some new grammar, e.g. the future continuous and/or the future perfect, or possibly the past conditional and/or mixed conditionals. To some extent though, 'new' grammar does taper off at this level, and much of the syllabus consists of consolidating and refining learners' knowledge and use of grammar introduced at pre-intermediate and intermediate levels. This often results in a more **global approach**: past simple, past continuous, and past perfect are brought together under the heading 'narrative' tenses; passives are analysed across a wide range of tense forms; different ways of expressing the future are contrasted, and so on. As language choice increases, so does the level of challenge, but for some learners, the fact that the names remain largely the same gives them a sense that they've seen it all and done it all before.

improving accuracy

You may need to counteract this perception by pointing out exactly why you are bringing together different language forms in this way. Choosing the correct structure where many forms are available is a true test of language accuracy, and this is one of the major challenges at this level. Many can now speak reasonably fluently, but producing accurate English in real time is hard. This was evident throughout our research data, as the two extracts below show. Both are taken from recordings of learners doing the **extended speaking** activity in unit eleven pp.134 to 135, and both show that the learners were able to interact quite freely and fluently in English and express quite complex ideas. If there is a weakness, it is that their level of fluency is not yet matched by a comparable degree of accuracy, and indeed, that their accuracy is erratic. They can get a structure right in one utterance, and then get it wrong in the next. There are a lot of errors which the learners could easily correct for themselves if they were monitoring their speech more carefully.

think!⁴

Look at the extracts below. Can you find two examples of:

- 1 incorrect forms of past modals
- 2 the wrong modal verb being used
- 3 past participles not being used
- 4 the wrong lexical item
- 5 lack of direct object

Learners read and then discuss a case study about two friends, one of whom borrows money from the other for his wedding, and then can't pay him back.

extract 1

- A *For me the first problem maybe was that Jeff shouldn't have borrow to Christopher so much money, because maybe he knows that he couldn't return the money, and maybe the situation it's normal, because they are friends but he has to think about if he couldn't returned the money.*
- B *Yeah, but I think he shouldn't have promised what he will pay the next month, because both of them known what he's not very well with money.*
- C *The problem is not that. I think that the problem is Jeff, no Christopher shouldn't have acted like that, he's his friend, and he knows that anyway he's gonna get the money back.*

- A *Sorry? Anyway ...?*
- C *He's gonna get the money anyway, so longer time maybe or he might have ...*
- B *No, but for the moment ... he promised what I pay you back in a month.*
- C *If he has like problems, or economic problems or he has just buy a new house or something, he can pay now.*
- A *Yes, but are you sure that this money will be return?*
- C *I don't know.*

extract 2

- A *What was the first problem and who was responsible?*
- B *For me it was Jeff because he want to marry without money, and maybe the wedding reception ...*
- A *The problem was he wanted to do a wedding reception very expensive.*
- C *He couldn't afford it.*
- A *And if you know you can't pay after, you have not to organize.*
- D *Personally I think ...*
- C *Would you be able to say 'no'?*
- A *No, I couldn't.*
- C *You know that it's a mistake?*
- D *I don't know, I don't think so, not mistake, personally, sometimes people would like to have big ceremony for wedding.*
- C *Yes, but if you can't afford it, you just can't do it, because ...*
- D *But Christopher at the time think that ...*
- C *He could pay, yes.*
- D *Yes.*
- A *But it wasn't a sure thing, he wasn't sure of it. If he wasn't sure of financial condition, he would have think of it.*
- D *But I think that Jeff have no responsible because Jeff believe can repay, pay back to Christopher at the time.*

from **natural English** upper-intermediate research data

go to **answer key** p.159

We believe that most learners at this level want feedback on accuracy, and have now reached a level where they are more capable of assimilating rules of use. At lower levels, there is so much to worry about that learners should be happy just to negotiate their way towards achieving a communicative aim, without feeling that it has to be accomplished without making a single mistake. It's not dissimilar to driving. For a learner driver, getting from A to B without mishap is the first priority; worrying about how smooth the gear changes are comes later. So too with language learning. It is only when learners are already reasonably fluent that they are in a position to refine their knowledge and skills to incorporate more subtle aspects of the language with greater accuracy.

expanding lexis

Another major area of challenge at this level is *lexis*¹. Here the scope is endless, so it is an aspect of language development which should be very motivating. Higher level learners should be trying to expand both their receptive and productive vocabulary. Receptive vocabulary needs to be increased in order for learners to cope with the demands of longer, more authentic spoken and written texts. Productively, this is the

*lexis*¹ go to glossary for numbered items p.159

level at which learners should aim to become less reliant on a very small range of basic words and phrases, and start expanding their knowledge of more specific items. Rather than relying on *good* to describe a meal, a play, a moment, a companion, an idea, or a cook, they will communicate more effectively by choosing the appropriate adjective: *a delicious meal, a thrilling play, a suitable moment, a delightful companion, a brilliant idea, or a skilful cook*. And of course, an important area for development is the number and length of lexical phrases they can use. Here is an example from the **student's book**.



natural English

making and responding to requests

2.4

These requests can be used in spoken or informal written English.

requests

I was wondering if you could _____ ?

Do you think you could (possibly) _____ ?

Is there any chance you could _____ ?

responses

Sure, _____ .

I'll see what _____ .

I'm afraid I can't - _____ .

Listen and fill the gaps. Practise the requests and responses with a partner.

from upper-intermediate **student's book**, p.53

Want to know more about vocabulary issues? Go to **how to ...** develop lexis at higher levels p.160.

conclusion

In this chapter, we have looked at:

- some reasons why higher level learners often experience dips in motivation
- some strategies to combat this, e.g. giving constructive feedback, organizing one-to-one or pair tutorials, and encouraging self-assessment, which all help learners to see their own progress
- ways in which you can gain and keep the interest of higher level learners, e.g. choosing materials with a high degree of interest and variety, using a diagnostic approach, involving learners in the choice of topics and tasks, and giving learners the opportunity to learn new facts and skills which may be useful outside the classroom
- aspects of language that learners generally need to improve on at this level, e.g. improving accuracy and expanding lexis.

answer key

think!³ p.157

How could you find out which topics your group are interested in? In small groups, learners could brainstorm topics which interest them, perhaps given a framework of hobbies, entertainment, work, social / political issues. Alternatively, you could give learners a list of topics (based on coursebook topics perhaps) and ask them to rank them in order of interest.

How could you use this information?

You may then decide to allocate time on a regular basis to these topics if they are not in your coursebook. Set up discussions based on questions generated by the learners themselves, bring in reading / listening texts for discussion, use the topics as the basis of learner presentations: short five-minute talks leading to group discussion.

think!⁴ p.158 possible answers

- 1 *shouldn't have borrowed*; *would have think it* (should be *thought*, but the meaning is also wrong - see 2).
- 2 *He has to think about it* should be *He should have thought about it*; *you have not to organize* should be *you shouldn't organize it*; *would have think of it* should be *should have thought about it*;
- 3 *borrow, return, buy, think*
- 4 *borrow* should be *lend*: *Jeff shouldn't have lent Christopher the money*; *economic problems* should be *financial problems*; *financial conditions* should be *financial situation*; *have no responsible* should be *is irresponsible*.
- 5 *think about it, organize it*.

glossary

lexis¹ / **vocabulary** We use these terms interchangeably to mean the words or phrases of a language, rather than its grammar. Traditionally, however, vocabulary has been largely viewed as consisting of individual words.

follow up

Harmer J 2001 *The Practice of English Language Teaching* Longman (chapter 3 section C on motivation)

Williams M *Motivation in Language Learning* in *English Teaching Professional* (October 1999)

Littlejohn A *Motivation: Where does it come from? Where does it go?* in *English Teaching Professional* (April 2001)

Lewis M 2000 *Teaching Collocation* LTP (Lewis emphasizes the importance of lexical phrases or pre-fabricated chunks, and also discusses accuracy and fluency with regard to level, pp.173-5)