

# Motivating Japanese university EFL learners in the language classroom using a task-based approach

Rieko Nishida

*This paper describes changes in Japanese university EFL learners' motivation while engaging in a Task-based Approach among Japanese University EFL learners. The paper especially addresses the issue of how students changed their attitudes toward English in the language classroom (learners' perspectives) and how the teacher utilized tasks and strategies (teachers' perspectives) to motivate students in the class. A review of the literature focusing on Task-based approach and motivational strategies will be introduced, then details of the practical settings, including participants and how task and motivational strategies were used in order to enhance students' willingness to participate in the class, will be discussed.*

## Introduction

The objective of this paper is to analyze changes in students' motivation while learning through a task-based approach (hereinafter, TBA) in a comprehensive English class which focused on listening and speaking, and which utilized motivational strategies and manipulation of the complexity of tasks. It specifically addressed the issue of how students perceived and changed their attitudes toward English in the language classroom (learners' perspectives) and how the teacher utilized tasks and strategies (teachers' perspectives) to motivate students in the class. As I was a teacher-researcher in the field, I was a part of the dynamics of the language classroom, and simultaneously manipulated two aspects - applying tasks appropriate to the students' proficiency level and intentionally using strategies to motivate students whose language proficiency was not particularly high. Firstly, a review of the literature focusing on TBA and motivational strategies will be introduced, then details of the practical settings, including participants and how task and motivational strategies were used in order to enhance students' willingness to participate in the class, will be discussed.

## Literature Review

### Motivation

For decades, motivation has been one of the central issues in the field of L2 studies – motivation has been found to significantly influence individual language learning (e.g., Dörnyei, 1990, 1994a, 1994b; Gardner, 1985; Gardner, Masgoret, Tennant & Mihic., 2004; among others), attracting numerous researchers and teachers (Dörnyei, 2005) and generating extensive research in the area.

Motivation is a broad term: according to Dörnyei (2001), it is an “abstract, hypothetical concept that we use to explain why people think and behave as they do” , and “a broad umbrella term that covers a variety of meanings” (1). Nevertheless, motivation plays a crucial role in L2 learning and is treated as a key issue. From an educational point of view, understanding students’ motivation in language learning has attracted both researchers and practitioners, since motivational influence is vital in every aspect of language learning. Therefore it is necessary for motivational research to focus on understanding the motivational features of the language classroom in practice, and this is mainly because it is vital for practitioners in the classroom to understand how to motivate students. Consequently, the 1990s saw many studies focusing on language learning contexts or actual language classrooms, and several comprehensive models of language learning motivation were postulated taking classroom variables into consideration (e.g., Dörnyei, 1994a; Williams & Burden, 1997).

An example of this is the study by Williams and Burden (1997), who noted the influences of cognition and learning situations such as the classroom context, testing the motivational impact within the classroom context including teachers and curriculum. They argued that “teachers establish in their classrooms a climate where confidence is built up” (Williams & Burden, 1997, 73), mistakes are accepted as part of their learning, and tasks and activities lead to successful learning experiences. Cohen and Dörnyei (2002) voiced a similar view that motivation in a language classroom can be influenced by how a teacher presents tasks and/or activities, or provides feedback and/or praise. In terms of classroom

management, it can be said that a teacher plays a vital role in language learning.

### **Motivational Strategies**

As teachers are part of classroom dynamics, and their skills in motivating students are one of the key components of language classroom as teachers, the application of motivational strategies has lately received the attention of motivational researchers (Sugita & Takeuchi, 2011). According to Dörnyei (2001), motivational strategies are “techniques that promote the individual’s goal-related behavior”, and it refers to those “motivational influences that are consciously exerted to achieve some systematic and enduring positive effect” (28). He emphasizes four motivational teaching practices: 1) creating the basic motivational condition; 2) generating initial motivation; 3) maintaining and promoting motivation; 4) encouraging positive retrospective self-evaluation. To describe these strategies in short: 1) creating the basic motivational condition: for example, creating a pleasant and supportive classroom atmosphere, is a vital part of classroom management, as is accepting students’ mistakes and caring about students’ learning. 2) Generating initial motivation: for example, teachers need to enhance students’ attitudes toward L2; also includes making relevant materials, in this case, tasks for the learners. 3) Maintaining and promoting motivation; for instance, making lessons enjoyable, presenting tasks in an interesting way to motivate learners, and protecting students’ self-esteem as well as enhancing students’ confidence in themselves. 4) Encouraging positive retrospective self-evaluation; for instance, providing the positive feedback that motivates students, and offering rewards to motivate students (These mentioned above are part of a range of motivational strategies – for a more comprehensive list, refer to Dörnyei (2001) in which 35 motivational strategies are outlined).

### **Task-based Instruction**

As indicated earlier, providing appropriate tasks is a vital part of classroom management which enhances students’ motivation in the language classroom. In the last few years, task design has attracted considerable attention and in second language acquisition (SLA) research, task is a central feature as a research field

as well as a construct in need of investigation (e.g., Ellis, 2005; Seedhouse, 2005). For many of today's teachers and SLA researchers, the intricacies of task-based interaction playing a facilitative role in language development are a key interest. In the classroom, it is necessary to design and deliver a sequence of the tasks that will enhance learners' motivation and sustain their efforts to learn L2. According to Robinson (2007), task design should enhance balanced language development; students need to learn L2 accurately, paying attention to fluency as well as complexity of production. Tasks also require students to work together to use the language functionally to solve problems that relate to some degree to the tasks that students may be faced with and need to accomplish using English skills in a real-world situation (Lambert & Engler, 2007; see also, Long, 2000, Skehan, 1996).

### **Language Pedagogy- The Study Context**

The participants were first year Japanese university students whose English proficiency level was not particularly high (approximately TOEIC score of 350). Comprehensive English classes were part of the university language requirement. Students were studying various majors such as interior design and life science - none of them were English majors. Students knew each other quite well and they maintained group cohesiveness in the language classes.

### **Textbooks**

*Interchange Intro* (Cambridge University Press ©) was chosen for the classroom textbook as well as which a task sheet was distributed to students - after doing some exercises from the textbook, students were asked to complete the task sheet during the classroom practice. Also, approximately 20 minutes of "*reading for pleasure*" (extensive reading) was given, and students read books that they liked. At the end of the class, students were asked to fill out a reflection sheet which contained "today's effort", "today's contribution to the class", and "homework that they had done". And also, to hear students' voices, an open-ended column was provided so that students were able to say something in relation to the language classroom.

## Task Framework

For every lesson, in addition to the textbook materials, a task was constructed taking into consideration students' language level and favorite activities. Students were working either in pairs or groups. Pair work consisted mainly of information gap tasks, including both non-fixed solution (open) and fixed solution (closed) types, as well as "compare and contrast" tasks. In order to address the tasks, the framework was referred to as Jane Willis' s "*a frame work for task-based learning*", and the task cycles were applied as follows: pre-task, main-task, and post-task. In the pre-task, students were asked to learn new vocabulary and grammar for that day, as well as listening tasks and conversation practice covered in the textbook. In the main-task, students were asked to pair up and do a task-sheet. As mentioned earlier, the tasks included fixed/non-fixed solution types as well as compare and contrast. Then later on, in the post-task, they had a chance to present what they had done in front of the class, and/or a writing task was given to assess students' grammatical understanding.

## Students' Perspectives: Students' Changes

As students were asked to fill out the open-ended questions (comments), I was able to see some changes in students' comments with regard to L2 learning. These students were from the lower-level classes. Similar patterns were observed among students, and some of them are included below.

(Student A)

April 11, 2011. "*I did not like and did not understand English at all up to now, so I was worried about the class. But the class was actually more enjoyable than I'd expected.*"

June 13, 2011. "*I started to understand English better than before. Because I understood a bit, I was more enthusiastic in English class.*"

July 25, 2011. "*We did a presentation. I was amused by my classmates as they did so well. I enjoyed it a lot.*" (Translations mine)(I underlined for emphasis).

(Student B)

- April 18, 2011. *"My partner asked me some questions, but it was difficult for me to answer. I also did not understand some vocabulary either."*
- May 16, 2011. *"I think I am able to understand a bit more English compared to earlier in the semester."*
- July 4, 2011. *"Now, I am able to read a bit more. I think I understand grammar more than before." (Translations mine)(Underlining added for emphasis).*

(Student C)

- April 11, 2011. *"I had to think about many things in English. It was very hard."*
- April 18, 2011. *"Today, everything was harder than the last lesson."*
- July 4, 2011. *"As we had over 10 lessons, I understand English better so that I can write English sentences faster than before. I am so pleased."*
- July 25, 2011. *"I've never had a presentation in English before, so it was difficult, but I think it was a very good experience for me." (Translations mine)(Underlining added for emphasis).*

(Student D)

- April 25, 2011. *"I enjoy English a bit."*
- May 16, 2011. *"I enjoy English a lot compared to before."*
- July 4, 2011. *"Lately, I enjoy making English sentences by myself."*
- July 25, 2011. *"It was a presentation day today. It was interesting to listen to my classmates' presentation. I enjoyed it a lot." (Translations mine)(Underlining added for emphasis).*

Earlier in the semester, students seemed to show less confidence in themselves, but in the course of time, eventually students showed more confidence when they were able to do tasks, solve problems and/or write English sentences. As some students mentioned (not only those included above) later in the semester, they started to understand English better than before, and because they understood more they started to enjoy, the English class. In order to develop confidence in themselves, which is a vital factor for L2 motivation (e.g, Nishida & Yashima,

2009; in press), students' proficiency level is another crucial factor that should be taken into account in applying tasks.

### **Teachers' Perspectives: Making Appropriate Tasks and Using Motivational Strategies**

As a teacher and a motivational researcher, I struggle with how to motivate students in the language classroom. As far as I am concerned, firstly, for students with lower English proficiency level, before commencing tasks, they need to re-learn the basic grammar and vocabulary as well as increase listening and communication skills in the pre-task. In this way, the pre-task plays a vital role in the task framework. When they review and acquire the basic grammar and vocabulary as well as communication and listening skills, they are able to work on tasks with their partner, and by doing so, they seem to enhance their competency according to their comments. Before moving to a main-task, students need to understand the grammar and vocabulary which are required for the main-task well enough so that they are able to work on the tasks by themselves.

Secondly, tasks need to be applied to students in a motivational way and teachers need to adjust to students' level of understanding in order to create appropriate tasks. For learners of lower proficiency levels, it may be better to integrate both closed and open versions of tasks. Students may experience more freedom in open versions of tasks; however, as open versions of tasks engage students in making creative contributions and thinking about original solutions, students with lower proficiency levels may face difficulty expressing themselves. The implementation and the timing of delivery of the open versions of tasks as well as closed tasks during the semester need to be considered carefully according to students' language proficiency level.

Thirdly, if a particular task is too difficult for some students, these students need peer-scaffolding (assistance) and/or teacher-scaffolding. Appropriate scaffolding is necessary when learners are not able to solve the tasks. Fourthly, I believe that the teacher plays a vital part in classroom management and the dynamics of

the language classroom. I, thereby, intentionally use motivational strategies for all students, not only for these with lower English proficiency, but also higher English proficiency students. I use motivational strategies such as creating a pleasant and supportive classroom atmosphere, accepting students' mistakes, enhancing students' attitudes toward L2, making relevant materials, making lessons enjoyable, and presenting tasks in an interesting way. In addition, giving positive feedback to students, and offering rewards as motivation are a vital part of classroom management.

### **Discussion**

The present paper described changes in students' motivation while learning through TBA in which the instructor utilized motivational strategies and manipulated the complexity of tasks in a comprehensive English class. In particular, the paper addressed the issue of learners' perspectives and teachers' perspectives to analyze changes in students' motivation, as well as describing how I addressed the tasks and motivational strategies in the class. As many practitioners know from their personal experience, there is not only one solution to motivating students in the language classroom, as the language classroom is both complex and dynamic. I tried to apply relevant tasks for the students mentioned in this paper, but the tasks need to be adjusted for students at different levels of language ability. This is also true of motivation strategies: some strategies may work for some students in a language classroom, while not working for students in another classroom; for example, in cases when students are too loud and do not listen to the teachers, the classroom needs to be controlled before applying any sort of strategy. Motivational strategies, therefore, can be selected according to the characteristics of each particular language class.

Lately, motivation in language learning has shifted its paradigm from "teacher-centered" to "learner-centered" (Kojima, Ozeki, & Hiromori, 2010). In this sense, teachers' skills in motivating students as well as the application of appropriate tasks will be seen as key factors in the language classroom. In motivating students, there are other factors to consider such as learner strategies, meta-

cognitive strategies, and learner autonomy as well as students' tendencies to be goal-orientated (see Kojima, et al.2010). I hope that utilizing motivational strategies and the suitable application of learning tasks will enhance motivation, willingness, and the pursuit of learning, and sustain language learning among Japanese university EFL learners.

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