

Reaction Management: A practical idea for improving student motivation in the EFL classroom

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Introduction

Motivating students in a classroom is a persistent concern for instructors. The frequency and erraticism with which an individual student's motivation changes requires the instructor to consider the motivational appeal of classroom materials. However, efforts to motivate students can lose sight of educational goals or effectiveness. Dornyei and Otto (1998) note that, "there is no shortage of competing motivational theories in social and motivational psychology" however, all are lacking in their appropriateness for L2 motivation (p. 43). They suggest a "process model of L2 motivation" in three complex phases: preactional phase, actional phase, postactional phase (Dornyei, 1998, p. 48). This paper will attempt to describe a more practical approach for developing L2 motivation in the classroom by postulating that motivation can be described as the combination of specific reactions that can be generated through classroom activities.

'Reaction Management' a business idea for developing classroom motivation

'Reaction management' is a term trademarked by Jon Taffer for his approach to business. This approach breaks the idea of business down to its underlying foundation "by understanding that we are in a business of reactions" (Trachta, 2011). Taffer clarifies that products such as a meal at a restaurant, a song, the design of a building, the advantages of one school versus another, etc. are vehicles to achieve the desired reaction (Trachta, 2011). Similarly, lesson activities are vehicles to desired learning outcomes and planning with the mindset of 'reaction management' can help give specific routes to achieving those difficult to define or evaluate goals. Three examples of reactions instructors should seek as an outcome of their lesson that will more likely create motivation and promote

advancement are:

1. Open mindedness - Activities, materials, and presentation styles that open the students' minds to be receptive to new concepts that are often contrary to their established perception of the world.
2. Confidence in the face of failure - It would be unreasonable to expect any person to fully comprehend new language and concepts with no more than a single, brief exposure to it. Students' expectations and fears should be soothed by the knowledge that there will be multiple exposures to language that is currently beyond their ability.
3. Curiosity - Curiosity is a reaction that motivates a student to seek out additional language exposure, review language taught in class, and try to discover things that cannot be covered in the limited number of classroom hours in a school year.

The rest of this paper will look at a single lesson plan for practicing tactics to improve performance in the describing a picture task in the TOEIC speaking and writing test as outlined in *Tactics for TOEIC Speaking and Writing Tests* (2010) and how the tasks manage to achieve the aforementioned reactions from students.

TOEIC speaking and writing tests

The TOEIC speaking and writing tests taken over the internet are designed to complement the listening and reading test sections by testing “the test-taker’s ability to communicate clearly in spoken and written English with tasks that are set in general and workplace contexts” (Trew, 2010, p. 2). Figure 1 below outlines what examinees can anticipate encountering for this task in the test.

In the test

- In this part of the test, you will be given a picture to describe in as much detail as you can.
- You will have 30 seconds to prepare your response.
- You will have 45 seconds to speak about the picture.

In *Tactics for TOEIC Speaking and Writing Tests*, Trew dedicates two units to tactics for successfully describing a picture. The first unit (unit 2 pp. 47–53) is comprised of activities to focus on lower level grammar. Lower level test tactics include using the present continuous, modifiers to create interest and specificity, and prepositions of place with techniques to efficiently use the limited time allotted to this part of the test such as briefly brainstorming related vocabulary and thinking of introductory sentences that answer questions the listener would have (Trew, 2010). The second unit (unit 8 pp. 93–98) focuses on higher level skills. Higher level test tactics include as speculation and justification, generalities, and possibility (Trew, 2010). The lesson plan reviewed in this paper reviews a technique from a previous lesson (about 25 minutes) before introducing a new test taking tactic to be practiced in the remaining 25 minutes.

Describe a picture, Lesson 2, June 26, 2013.

1. Review prepositions of place (Low level grammar test tactic).

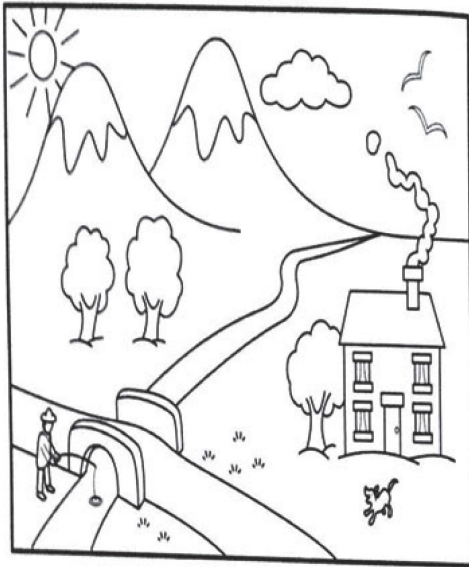
Student A uses prepositions of place to tell Student B where the missing items of the picture are located. Student B draws the missing items.

Students compare pictures for accuracy. When completed

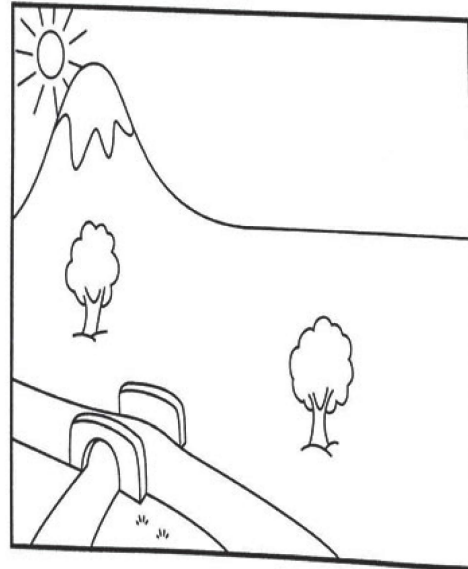
Student B draws an original picture and uses prepositions of place to instruct Student A what to draw. Again compare for accuracy.

For this activity Student A was given **picture 1** and Student B was given **picture 2**.

Picture 1



Picture 2



Based on the students' involvement with this activity, this first task appeared successful in achieving the three desired student reactions. Providing the first picture to review prepositions of place, made the task easy to understand which opened the students' minds to completing the task. Completing the task required flexible vocabulary, allowing Student A to focus on communicating meaning by negotiating for meaning or using simple descriptions to communicate unavailable lexicon rather than get shut down by aiming for lexical accuracy (i.e.; Whether it is a man or woman fishing is not as important as the fact that there is a person fishing by the bridge) and the prepositions of place being reviewed. Thus, students could be confident in failure because mistakes would not necessarily prevent success in the task. Curiosity was generated both in "How will our pictures compare?" and a second time with Student B "What should I draw? How can I communicate it?" and Student A "What did Student B draw?"

During this task, I observed that L1 use was low, perhaps minimum and that when it was used, the L1 use was to repair misunderstanding and balance student skill levels.

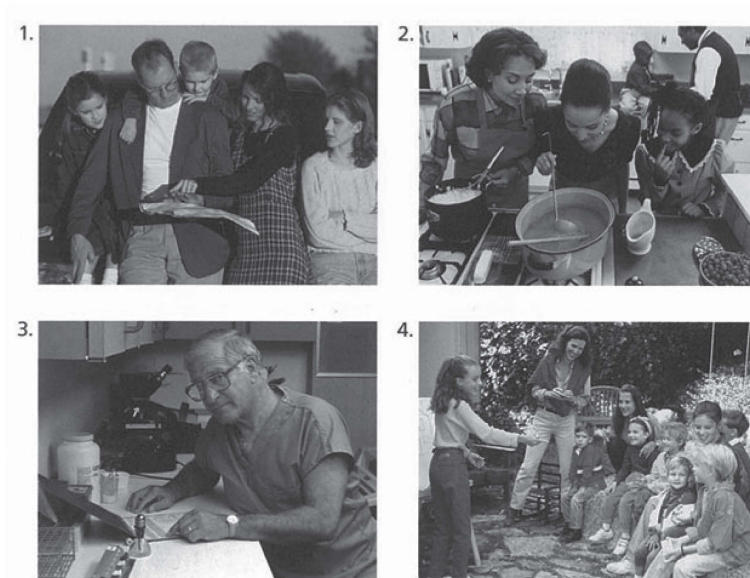
2. Test tip - Use phrases to indicate that you are speculating

Students take turns making two or more sentences for each picture 1-4. Each

student asks his partner to guess which picture is being described. Use the phrases and words provided for help.

For this activity, five speculation expressions (e.g.; I think... because..., Maybe ..., Perhaps...) were introduced on the blackboard and modeling. Once it could be confirmed that the students understood the meaning and possible uses of the introduced speculation expressions, they were asked to look at **picture 3**, choose one picture, make a speculating sentence and check if their partner could identify which picture they were describing.

Picture 3



This task asked students to attempt to implement a new concept (speculation), but the reaction of open mindedness carried over from the previous task and the general classroom environment. Curiosity was encouraged via the need to listen and interpret the information being communicated by the other student. Again this task allowed for a variety of paths for communication to be successful, so the students were willing to experiment and there was no use of L1.

After the students had shown sufficient mastery of using the newly introduced concept of speculation, they were instructed to repeat the exercise with expanded descriptions, which included introductory sentences and prepositions of place. In this way students were provided the opportunity to review previously studied language and practice putting the individually practiced

concepts together.

Conclusion

Using ‘reaction management’ as a method of planning a lesson helps to plan lessons that are multi-faceted and scaffolded. Utilizing repetition in an original way to gives students additional opportunities to practice previous material without boring them. This paper proposed three basic reactions to manage; however, as students advance or age level dictates additional reactions may be desired. Planning activities that manage to generate a series of small reactions to the L2 learning experience can open students to being more receptive to goals that they might normally perceive as too difficult.

References

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- Trachta, A. (2011, July 12). Q & A with Bar Rescue’s Jon Taffer: “Everything is to make money” . Retrieved January 25, 2014, from LA Weekly Blog: www.laweekly.com
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