Intrinsic motivation in the EFL classroom: preferred taxonomies for classroom activities

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**Abstract**

Motivation has become a major research concern in the field of language learning. Especially, intrinsic motivation is one of the most reliable predictors of students’ success in FL/EFL learning. However, the educational materials currently used are still traditional in nature and make it rather difficult for teachers to motivate students. The main aim of this study will be to analyse some of the most preferred task taxonomies to foster intrinsic motivation in the EFL classroom. The results will attempt to provide a clear view of the most appropriate types of activities to enhance intrinsic motivation in the EFL classroom.

**Keywords:** motivation, intrinsic motivation, EFL classroom, classroom activities, taxonomy

**Titulo:** La motivación intrínseca en el aula de inglés como lengua extranjera: taxonomía de actividades motivadoras en el aula.

**Resumen**

La motivación se ha convertido en un importante asunto de interés en el campo del aprendizaje de lenguas extranjeras. En especial, la motivación intrínseca es uno de los indicadores más fiables de éxito en el aprendizaje de lenguas extranjeras. Sin embargo, los materiales y actividades que actualmente se utilizan en el aula se consideran tradicionales y hacen que la tarea del profesor de motivar a los alumnos resulte complicada. El objetivo de este artículo es analizar y proporcionar una idea clara sobre los tipos más apropiados de actividades para fomentar la motivación intrínseca en el aula de inglés.

**Palabras clave:** motivación, motivación intrínseca, aula de inglés como lengua extranjera, actividades en clase, taxonomía.

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**INTRINSIC MOTIVATION IN THE EFL CLASSROOM**

Motivation is a complex phenomenon. It can be understood from different fields and points of view. In the field of language learning, several definitions are provided. Gardner (1985, cited in Anjomshoa & Sadighi, 2015: 126) defines motivation as “the combination of effort plus desire to achieve the goal of learning the language plus favourable attitudes towards learning the language”. From this definition, Gardner and Lambert classified motivation according to two categories: integrative and instrumental. Besides, Ryan and Deci (2000) defined motivation in terms of the determination to act towards an end and distinguished between two main types: intrinsic and extrinsic. Intrinsic motivation refers to doing something because it is interesting or enjoyable; and extrinsic motivation refers to doing something because of an external reward.

Regarding foreign language learning, numerous studies have shown that intrinsically motivated students learn better due to their great capacity and effort for concentration. But, the issue is that teaching materials are dry, inappropriate and impractical. Indeed, many teachers are still using traditional methods and these materials do not help to motivate students intrinsically. Contrarily, if teachers used other kind of materials encouraging students to participate in the learning process and, thus, engaging them in tasks, intrinsic motivation could be fostered and learning would be more valuable. In this way, teachers could instil curiosity and willingness towards learning.

Intrinsic motivation, even if not sufficient, is an indispensable factor that contributes to successful language learning. But it is crucial to stress that enhancing intrinsic motivation is not simple. In current FL classrooms, teachers face the problem that many students are not intrinsically motivated, even more, some of them are demotivated and classroom activities do not help to achieve this purpose. For this reason, teachers should do their best when designing their materials in order to arouse and maintain such inner interest in students. Hence, the question that arises is what specific tasks better activate intrinsic motivation in EFL students and what L2 tasks better reflect students’ activity preferences?
TAXONOMIES IN ACTIVITY DESIGN

One of the most valued activities according to students’ opinions is L2 games. Research findings show that games are considered motivating and low-anxiety activities (Pigott, 2008; Kong, 2009; Weger, 2010; Tsao, 2012). In addition to games, the use of songs and films in the FL classroom can be very engaging if activities are well-prepared.

The use of authentic materials and real-life topics can be reflected in a wide variety of materials such as magazines, websites, travel brochures, etc. (Tsao, 2012). Nevertheless, it has been much discussed the matter of using authentic materials or adapted because of their difficulty with less-proficient students. Findings show that authentic materials are an excellent source of information and they can promote intrinsic motivation to a great extent, but they need to be carefully selected in order to meet the course objectives.

Due to their scarce command of the L2 and the difficulty they encounter with authentic materials, low proficient learners tend to prefer not too cognitively challenging activities such as shadowing, dictation and listening to music. And in this sense, although according to some authors (Fukuda et al, 2014), the implementation of these tasks does not guarantee some certain intrinsic motivation enhancement; these students are proven to feel more comfortable and confident. Therefore, some necessary balance could be achieved when dealing with authentic materials and low proficient students.

Finally, Chelbi (2010) adds to the list of activities those involving ICT, role-plays, guest-speakers and demonstrations. Nevertheless, there are many variables influencing students’ attitudes and preferences towards FLL, and even designing the most appropriate tasks, it is clear that “there are no absolute engaging tasks for every ESL learner” (Lee, 2012:31). Hence, taking into account this shortcoming, we are going to select some specific L2 classroom activities that better reflect these learner preferences.

RECEPTIVE SKILLS: LISTENING AND READING

The impression students have on the different FL skills and subskills varies depending on whether certain motivating factors (i.e. attitudes, utility or enjoyment) are present or not. For instance, according to Fukuda et al’s (2014) findings, listening tasks, in general, are perceived by students as significantly motivating; whereas reading, on the other hand, is considered unattractive by students. However, taking into account the characteristics above mentioned, tasks can be designed in such a way that students can also enjoy reading (e.g. by using lyrics).

Regarding the empirical studies collected related to the listening skill, songs are perceived as one of the most motivating activities, and they can be used with a wide range of functions; i.e. for listening to them, for using them for pronunciation, for reading lyrics, etc.; a fact that many findings corroborate (Pigott, 2008; Tsao, 2012; Fukuda et al, 2014). In Fukuda et al (2014), the authors’ contribution show that both for high and low motivated students, listening to English songs was a highly motivating activity. In addition to songs, videos and films and film-related activities are also considered interesting and engaging (Pigott, 2008; Montlhaka, 2012). With these types of activities, students have to assess their listening skills based on their recall of what has been said (Montlhaka, 2012). Thus, the use of audiovisuals can be stressed to be an essential material to design listening tasks.

The same authors, Pigott (2008) and Montlhaka (2012), present in their studies that group and class discussion, involving listening to real conversations, also motivates students intrinsically. In debates or discussions, students are taking part in a communicative process in which do they have to speak, but also to listen to their classmates in order to produce a response. Therefore, these kinds of activities could be classified both in listening and speaking activities, as we will see more in depth when talking about speaking.

When it comes to revising students’ preferences towards reading tasks, it is difficult to specify a task typology, as such, that can foster intrinsic motivation in FL learners, but, what has been demonstrated is that pre-reading activities and other kind of tasks can result in reading engagement. An example of this is shown by Komiyama (2009) and Lee (2012). In this sense, pre-reading vocabulary activities can help students’ engagement in the reading task because pre-studying unknown vocabulary reduces the task difficulty and there is a balance between the task complexity and the reading proficiency level. Therefore, these activities engage students in the reading task so that intrinsic motivation may be then fostered.

Other typologies mentioned by Blay et al (2009), Komiyama (2009) Johnson (2012) and Lee (2012) are quizzes and jigsaws. From the data collected, it can be stated that practice-based activities like quizzes or jigsaws can also result in
reading task involvement. These activities include group work and cooperative interactions (features previously naming) and they can be very effective because they engage students in meaningful interactions.

Apart from this, extensive reading can help students find enjoyment and interest in reading. Komiyama (2009) and Ahmadi (2013) suggest the implementation of reading programs where students can choose the topic, genre and level of difficulty preferred, and, in this way, reading for pleasure can be instilled in students.

**PRODUCTIVE SKILLS: SPEAKING AND WRITING**

In relation to the speaking skill, there are several speaking activities that can be implemented to enhance intrinsic motivation. Speaking activities should be challenging for students, cooperative, and foremost, meaningful and purposeful. Speaking activities may also be based on real-life topics so that students can see any similarity with reality.

A first example of speaking activities is the so-called warming up. This activity is a good way of starting lessons because questions put the learner into a problem-solving mode and in this way interest can be enhanced at the beginning of the lesson (Schmidt et al, 1996). If attention is maintained, students’ involvement is facilitated and they are encouraged to participate in the lesson.

Similarly, debates and discussions are valuable activities for teachers and students in order to foster intrinsic motivation. As we have said before, in these activities, students are involved in a communicative process in which speaking is as important as listening, so that the flow of the conversation can be followed. Authors such as Bahous et al (2011) and Naima (2014) stress the importance of these speaking activities in the FL classroom, but Bahous et al (2011) add a considerable fact; according to them, providing students with reading materials prior a debate or a discussion is helpful because students can support their arguments properly.

Schmidt et al (1996), Kuramoto (2002); Chelbi (2010), Naima (2014) and Ghanizadeh and Jahedizadeh (2015) provide other activities such as role-plays and simulations, story-telling, jigsaws, puzzles, information gap activities, dialogues, students’ presentations, talks and show and tell, surveys, films, videos and activities using pictures. According to the authors, these activities are considered enjoyable and engaging by students. The authors provide a long list of activities since they emphasise the importance of varying activities and use language games and group work in the classroom to enhance intrinsic motivation and also to lower anxiety and strengthen self-esteem.

In relation to speaking activities, we cannot forget the use of ICT. According to Ramachaudran (2004, cited in Bahous et al., 2011), using new technologies will encourage and motivate learners to use the target language. The example proposed is email talks. Thanks to this activity which consists on the learners’ interaction in the English language, elementary and middle school students improved their language proficiency and became more engaged in the task.

The writing skill is categorised by students as unpopular and the reason of this may lie in the inability students have to write a composition because of their little practice. In this sense, this is a consequence of the little space that current activities leave for writing. Fukuda et al’s (2014) findings show that by using songs and lyrics to work on writing, it can be appealing for students and writing can be effective.

Broadsly speaking, technology is the main force that leads students to write. Many studies demonstrate the positive influence technology has on writing (Kim, 2003, cited in Bahous et al, 2011; Bahous et al, 2011; Yuan-bing, 2011). Yuan-bing (2011) lists a series of writing tasks that motivate students intrinsically by using technology. For instance, IEEs (Intercultural Email Exchanges) or blogs, which are very effective ways to provide authentic, interesting and communicative resources apart from being popular in language classroom. Moreover, ICT, such as email, blog and web mail will enable students to write in real-life context and they have the purpose of inspiring learners’ independence of writing. It helps to arouse intrinsic motivation by providing learners with authentic input, and real context and audience.

Additionally, Yuan-bing (2011) cites a research by Wang (2004) in which he designed a magazine-editing project among students. It consisted of editing their own magazine and carrying out pair and work activities to contribute to it. He found out that the project provided students with a lot of freedom to design and plan their own ideas and students were highly motivated and engaged in the task performance.

Other activities suggested by Yuan-bing (2011) to motivate students intrinsically are peer evaluation and self-assessment. Students learn better if they spend time discussing the difficulties and problems in pairs or groups and apart from learning from each other, they can upgrade their works. Some other examples of tasks to foster intrinsic motivation...
are writing diaries in which students are encouraged to write a diary of their happy moments and failures in writing; or writing buddies, in which students work with a ‘buddy’ to take notes based on three aspects: writing goal, writing plan and writing report.

**GRAMMAR AND VOCABULARY**

Concerning the issue of grammar activities, it is clear that traditional grammar teaching does not work at all in the EFL classroom and students regard repetitive drill and grammar practice as low-motivating activities (Tsao, 2012). In addition to this, Guendouze (2012) explains that students do not like drills because what is expected from them is just mechanical answers. Contrarily, communicative tasks, such as workouts, are a better way of promoting intrinsic motivation. According to the author, workouts provide teachers with a variety of ways through which to make the acquisition process engaging and rewarding. Some examples of workouts are warming ups which add an element of enjoyment and personal involvement; and they can specifically be used during a session, especially when a relief of tension or a change of pace is needed.

Another relevant activity proposed by Chelbi (2010) is the use of dialogues. Despite the fact that this activity can be considered a traditional and low-motivating one, the author supports its usefulness to motivate students in the EFL classroom. In addition, dialogues are a great opportunity to focus on grammar and lexical structures at the same time. This activity can be adapted in many ways so as to address the objectives needed and, if we combine it with other characteristics such as real-life topics and situations and the use of ICT, it can become a very appealing and stimulating task.

Finally, it is striking the fact that there are not many studies regarding the teaching of vocabulary through motivating activities. The little findings found concerning vocabulary instruction suggest that the main characteristic is contextualisation. According to Tsao (2012) the best way of learning vocabulary is by using authentic materials to learn vocabulary in context. Authentic materials include reading books, magazines, web pages, etc. but this field needs further research on it.

Some other vocabulary activities are dialogues (aforementioned) and chants. Chelbi (2010) suggests that chants can be entertaining and engaging and that by listening to songs or playing computer games students can learn many words and idiomatic expressions implicitly, being then easy to remember. However, it is pretty difficult to teach certain vocabulary topics through songs and games, since they must be well-designed.

**CONCLUSION**

In order to summarise all the previous information, multiple authors (Schmidt et al, 1996; Pigott, 2008; Komiyama, 2009; Kong, 2009; Chelbi, 2010; Bahous et al, 2011; Yuan-bing, 2011; Johnson, 2012; Montehaka, 2012; Tsao, 2012; Weger, 2012; Naima; 2014; Fukuda et al, 2014) have provided us with a solid classification of motivation-oriented grammar, vocabulary and skill-based activities. Findings show that within the activities classified as intrinsically motivating we can find four major categories: (i) games, songs, videos and films; (ii) magazines, newspapers, websites and travel brochures (either as sources for reading or writing projects); (iii) role-plays, simulations, group and class debates and related activities involving group work and interaction, and; (iv) email talks, blogs, webmail and magazine-editing projects and a long etcetera of tasks and projects using ICT.

Regarding the first category of activities, games, songs, videos and films, such activities are considered valuable activities in all the skills, especially listening, according to students’ opinions (Pigott, 2008; Kong, 2009; Tsao, 2012; Fukuda et al, 2014). Concerning the second category of activities, corresponding to authentic materials, these are used in the form of magazines, newspapers, websites or travel brochures, among others, and they can be used as reading materials or writing projects. Thirdly, the next group of activities are those which share characteristics such as challenge, cooperation and interaction. This category includes speaking activities such as: role-plays, simulations, group and class debates, storytelling, quizzes, jigsaws, puzzles, information gap activities, dialogues, students’ presentations, show and tell, surveys and recording videos. Finally, in the last category, we find activities involving ICT, mainly related to writing. The tasks proposed are email talks, blogs, webmail and magazine-editing projects. Ramachaudran (2004, cited in Bahous et al., 2011) and Wang (2004, cited in Yuan-bing, 2011) state that the use of new technologies will encourage and motivate learners to use the target language. The findings of these empirical studies showed that thanks to the use of new technologies, students...
improved their language proficiency and became more engaged in the task. Thus, they are a clear example of the benefits of ICT in increasing students’ intrinsic motivation.

We can finally conclude that if these features and tasks are taken into account in EFL in-class activities, teachers can motivate students intrinsically, and what is more important, they can ensure that students enjoy learning. These are the reasons why implementing intrinsically motivating activities in the L2 classroom would achieve better results in the field of EFL learning.

### Bibliografia