

Motivational Techniques in EFL Classrooms in the Universities of Kurdistan

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doi: 10.23918/ijsses.v7i1p88

Abstract: Despite the massive amount of studies on motivation and motivation related issues, an issue yet to be investigated is motivational techniques that are used by university teachers of Kurdistan. Hence, this study aims to investigate the primary strategies lecturers use to motivate their pupils in EFL classrooms on tertiary level. To realize this purpose, a qualitative method is used to provide detailed information about the subject matter by conducting interviews with six experienced teachers to share their insights and knowledge on motivational techniques. Our analysis has revealed that the motivational techniques used by the teachers are classified into two major categories; the techniques that are used inside of classrooms and the techniques that are outside of classrooms. The results help readers to get a clear sense about the main strategies that are used by these teachers. These techniques can also give EFL teachers beneficial information so that they can use it in their classes to secure the motivational level of their students.

Keywords: Motivation, EFL Learners, Language Learning, Achievement, University

1. Introduction

The process of learning a language is a complex one, it does not only rely on the power of minds and the types of intelligence, but also some other factors. The issue is deeper than that. There are several other factors in EFL- teaching affect the process such as the instructors, the learners as well as the material that are used. Moreover, some other part might have impact on the learning process like, the administration staff, the strategies that are used by the teachers, the buildings and the library facilities, as well as class amenities (Issan & Gomaa, 2010). All that being said, there is another indispensable entity that should be never be taken for granted, which is motivation. Without motivation the class is like a body without soul, which is cold and lifeless. In learning a second language, Cheng and Dörnyei (2007) believe motivation is like an initial engine to start the process and later acts as a lasting driving force that assists the learner to maintain his/her inertia throughout the often arduous expedition of acquiring a second language. As a matter of fact, it is possible to say without motivation the most aptitude learners might turn up being unsuccessful, while the person with the right amount of motivation can overcome any adversity and achieve the desired goal disregarding of his cognitive ability and unsuitable learning conditions.

Motivation plays a significant role in learning a foreign language, since it is the dynamic impetus that triggers the mental and physical activity and sustains the desire to continue in the long and tiring learning journey (Mart, 2011; Al-Mahrooqi, Shahid, & Cofie, 2012). Motivation is complex, it encompasses

components such as: value of the task, and the prediction of the chances of success by students and reasons behind the successes and failures of the task (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011).

Teachers play an important role in students' learning, especially, motivated teachers so that they can transfer the knowledge they have through love and enthusiasm. Regardless of abilities, skills, and knowledge if a teacher doesn't have enough strategies to motivate students it's unlikely to expect fruitful products. It has been proved by many research and studies that there is a directly proportional relationship between students' achievement and high motivation.

Many studies have been conducted on this topic in different contexts. There is a need for a study about the strategies that can be used in the higher education of Kurdish context so that the instructors can benefit from them in their teaching life- to the best of my knowledge there is not enough study on this in Kurdistan. So many times, students are demotivated in the process of language learning I hope this study will serve as a remedy for the problems in this field and light a torch so that it lightens the path and paves the way for the future posterity to keep them motivated. The purpose of the study is to explore and investigate the most important and fundamental motivational techniques used by teachers in the universities of Kurdistan. In the hope this study will give us some ideas regarding the techniques to promote the education process in a more efficient way.

This research paper attempts to answer the following question:

What are the primary techniques that are used by university teachers in Kurdistan?

2. Literature Review

The realization of the power of motivation on language learning goes back to the 1950s and even before that. Gardner and Lambert (1959) examined that language aptitude is not the only factor in determining a second language. They believed success in learning a L2 is improved by the ability of the learner to embrace particular behaviour patterns which are characteristics of the target language culture. As a matter of fact, according to Cheng and Dörnyei (2007) when we look back at the previous studies, we can easily notice many past researches were done on finding and categorizing various types of motivation rather than developing strategies to boost motivation. However, in the last two decades a large number of second language researchers have tried to devise and summarize motivational strategies for applying in classrooms (e.g. Alison & Halliwell, 2002; Brown, 2001; Williams & Burden, 1997). So, in the past most of the studies were just about identification and categorization, not really into the application of those theories in the real world. In contrast to that now the situation has changed, and many books and articles are being published on the ways of applying the present knowledge on the actual ground.

On the matter of applying the motivational techniques, two prominent scholars Gardner and Tremblay (1994) stated that even though there are many theoretical implications and suggestions about motivation but from a scientific point of view none of this is really significant if they are not backed by empirical proofs and tangible evidence. That is why Dörnyei and Csizer (1998) decided to conduct a study to prove the theoretical knowledge are feasible in the real world. The research was conducted with Hungarian teachers by assessing fifty-one motivational techniques which were considered important by the teachers and were frequently used. In the study, 10 commandments were deduced, which were deemed as the most crucial

strategies coming out from the research. However, since these commandments were taken from western theoretical context, they may not be applicable in every culture to the same extent. That is why maybe these techniques might be feasible to the Hungarian English teachers. On the other hand, if the same questionnaire were given to the Kurdish teachers the result might have been totally different. That is to say, there are some universal values and techniques that can be positive across many cultures. However, it is not a sound decision to pick any kind of strategy to specific situations, because although maybe the techniques are recommended by famous scholar, but they might be not suitable for every context.

All of that being said, as Whitaker (2004) states the most fundamental variable in an educational setting is the teacher. Hence, we can understand how important a teacher is in classrooms and in motivating students. In a study conducted by Atkinson (2000) it was shown that there is a direct relationship between the positive impact of motivated teachers on motivating students. Other researchers have also identified how teachers can improve students' motivation to a high degree (Mart, 2013a; Mart 2013b; Koran, 2015; Altun, 2017a: Altun, 2017b). They concluded that students reach maximum amount of motivation when their teacher act as a facilitator, as a consultant, and as a supporter. So, if a teacher can incorporate all of these qualities in himself/herself they can ascend their pupils to their highest potentials. This also implicates that a teacher without these characteristics is difficult to get his students to a high level.

When it comes to the motivational strategies that should be used by the teacher many techniques come into mind. Some of them has something to do with inside aspect of classrooms such as providing a safe and non-threatening atmosphere. Another technique is like choosing interesting materials, that students can relate to and find them personally meaningful and engaging like using realia or authentic materials (Mart, 2012; Mart, 2018; Mart 2019), or taking the students different types of intelligences into consideration such as visual, audio-lingual, or kinesthetic. Or some other techniques like using technology as Schacter (1999) and Altun (2015) suggest, to be connected to students in the real and also in the virtual world. Or building strong bonds with students, or by being motivated yourself (teacher), so that the learners can benefit from your positive halo effect.

3. Methodology

The purpose of this qualitative research study is to find out what are the primary strategies that are used by university teachers in Kurdistan universities. To achieve this aim semi-structured interviews are conducted so that more in-depth knowledge can be gained. A description of the participants, how the data were collected with their analysis are coming in the following sections.

3.1 Participants

The number of the participants who have been interviewed in this study were six (4 males, 2 females). The teachers were all English language teachers, with a minimum of 10 years of experience in the teaching career. Moreover, they were from different nationalities (Kurd, Turk, Persian, and Kirgiz). This diversity gives us a better opportunity to be acquainted with various techniques that are used by different teachers from different ethnicities. The lecturers were from 5 prestigious universities. Namely Salahadin University, Tishik International University, Soran University, Knowledge University, and lastly the University of Kurdistan Hawler.

3.2 Data Collection and Analysis

The method used to conduct the interviews was semi-structures interview. Meanwhile, the researcher piloted the interview with a professional teacher to ascertain that the questions are aligned with the purpose of the research and are answers to the research question. Since the author works in Tishik University most of the interviews were conducted inside the same campus. While one of the participants was out of the Tishik campus so the researcher had to visit her. The reason why most of the teachers were interviewed inside Tishik was that most of them were part-time teachers. The interviewees were contacted through social media or their phone numbers before and a meeting time was arranged. For the purpose of recording the conversation a phone recording program was utilized, and before every interview the voice system was tried out to ensure everything was on the right track. One of the problems while collecting the data was that one of the female teachers did not want her voice to be recorded. However, after she was assured that her identity would be anonymous, she consented.

In the meantime, for the purpose of analyzing the data the audios were not transcribed but rather were listened to meticulously by the researcher, for a minimum of two times. The data were classified into different codes, and the codes were connected to form themes, which the codes were subcategorized under them. To ensure validity the themes and the codes were also reviewed to by a colleague to make sure that everything was on the right track.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Inside Classroom Techniques

One of the most important methods to motivate students is to provide them a safe environment, where they are comfortable and relaxed. This technique was voiced by all of the teachers. One of the teachers said: “I promote a non-threatening environment. I would make a positive environment, so everyone can feel they are confident, they are important”. Another teacher added: “ I use warm language, I use some expression to lower affective filter, I also tell them to speak, or respond, and make mistakes, all kinds of mistakes are tolerated in my classes”. The importance of this finding is parallel to what has been found in a study about Taiwanese teachers, who have also seen the sensitivity of the issue and tried to promote more risk-taking and to lower the rate the anxiety of the students (Cheng & Dornyei, 2007). Additionally, another lecturer said: “I smile and use my body language, and I give them a friendly attitude”. Yet another teacher uses a more liberal technique to make her students relaxed: “Food and water are allowed in my classes, since I acknowledge that sometimes my students skip lunch because of classes”. So, this strategy can help students to feel more like home.

Some other times having a motivated teacher that inspires the students and makes them energized is all what the learners need. That is why the teachers proposed such a technique; one teacher commented: “I try to motivate my students by being motivated myself”. Yet another teacher said: “I rise my mood, even if I am sad, I don’t reflect it to my students, I try to enter class with high energy”. According to Dornyei (2001), when teachers are motivated it is more like an infectious disease, soon everyone in the classroom will be infected. This strategy also coincides with Taiwanese study mentioned above. This reality proves there are some techniques that work across different cultures.

Despite the two strategies mentioned above there is another one which is about choosing interesting topics that pique the interests of students and help them to be more engaged in the classroom activities. They recommend it is ok to follow a textbooks but that is not always the best choice: “I think when you follow a textbook, it is a great thing because you have reference and everything, but it can also become very boring, since it is very predictable, and predictable usually means boring, that is why I try to use outside sources as well”. The importance of selecting interesting materials for students is undeniable. However, this should be tailored into the lesson in a very creative fashion to make students inclined towards the subject matters. The answers from the interviews support Williams and Burden’s (1997: 4) observation that instructors ‘should be clear in their minds why specific tasks have been selected and careful to convey exactly what is required of the learners’.

4.2 Outside of Classroom Techniques

Outside of class relationships have a great impact on what is happening inside the class. All of the teachers emphasized the importance of outside of class teacher-student relationship unanimously. One teacher commented: “If you (teacher) are close to students, students become close to you”. He also mentioned that he spends his break times with his students. He believes that this positive relationship reflects in the classroom as well and makes the class more comfortable. Another teacher said: “I sometimes eat my lunch with my students, and also in the spring I go with them to picnic, I believe this relationship helps me a lot to have more relaxed classes”. Of course, in these interactions they get more in touch with their students and this way they get to know more about the issues and the problems of the students. Dornyei (2001) asserts that teachers who are involved with their students’ problem and issues motivate them better in compare who are not personally interested in learner issues.

Yet another important technique that was mentioned by the teachers and I couldn’t find any support for it in the current literature is using technology to be engaged with students. One teacher reported: “I have a good relationship outside my classroom through social media, there are some teachers who avoid it, but I do have the sensation that it works well for the students to get in touch with them, to give them instructions and feedbacks, I have Viber groups, and Messenger groups with my students”. Similarly, another teacher reported: “I have my WhatsApp group, I check the writing of the students from there, and I also keep my connection with them in the holidays”. So, it can be seen how technology is used by the teacher to make their students engaged by using new methods. In this manner, the students can feel that the teachers are not just there to give their knowledge and take their salary but rather to help them by any means possible.

Another important factor to motivate their students the teachers have assigned office hours. But they also mentioned if they see a student has issues and they are sad they would extend helping hands regardless if it is an office hour or not. One teacher claimed: “I set up office hours, and I also accept them outside of office hours. I offer them tea, coffee, and biscuits. I generally accept students outside my office hours, I try my best to make a cozy atmosphere, so they will believe and trust me”. Another teacher said: “If I see a student sad or gloomy, I will talk to her/him, and try to identify the problem so that I can help in the best way possible”. Dedicating a specific time for students is a very powerful technique to make students relaxed, to know that there is also someone that they can visit when they have hard times with their life and with their lessons.

5. Conclusion

The current study aimed at investigating the primary techniques that are used by university teachers of Kurdistan region. This study gives a clear sense of what are the main strategies that are used by various teacher across different universities. The paper resulted in finding out that there are two distinctive themes in motivational strategies. The first major category is the techniques that are used inside classroom to motivate students such as; providing a non-threatening and a secure classroom environment, teachers themselves being motivated, and choosing interesting topics that make students actively engaged inside the class. On the other hand, the outside of class strategies include rapport between teacher and students, using social media and technology, as well having specific office hours. We recognize that the universities that were chosen on this study may not reflect all of the Kurdistan Region, and this may constitute a limitation. However, this topic is a very significant topic and more research should be conducted on this matter, since English is becoming more and more important day in, day out in the region. That is why EFL teacher should come up with more motivational techniques to hone their skills and facilitate the learning for the coming generations.

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