

FOSTERING STUDENT ENGAGEMENT AND MOTIVATION DURING BUSINESS ENGLISH CLASSES

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to briefly analyze the importance of student motivation and to highlight the role of teachers in fostering their involvement during Business English classes. Moreover, the main teaching / learning strategies that stem from students' academic interests and needs are characterized too. These strategies are: ensuring a welcoming classroom environment for students from different cultures; enhancing students' self-belief by creating collaborative, supportive atmosphere with high but achievable standards; developing metacognitive skills; applying modern technologies; involving students in extracurricular activities; offering support and encouragement; allowing students to work autonomously, concentrating on active learning, etc. While intrinsic motivation plays the primary role in the learning process, the teacher remains the central figure.

Key words: *academic environment, achievements, engagement, intrinsic motivation, motivation, physical stability, student's self-belief, teaching process.*

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1. INTRODUCTION

Motivating students is one of the major challenges teachers face in their teaching process nowadays. Conceptualized as students' energy and drive to engage, learn, work effectively, and achieve their potential at the lessons, motivation and engagement play a great role in students' interest and enjoyment of learning. Of course, both teachers and students play huge roles in academic achievement. Engagement with learning is essential because it is engagement that leads to sustained interaction and practice. Coaching, instruction, and feedback become critical to ensure that students develop good habits and increase their proficiency. Increased competence typically leads to motivation to engage further, generating a cycle of engagement and developing competence that supports improved student achievement. Consequently, those students who are motivated by and engaged in learning tend to perform considerably higher academically and are better behaved than unmotivated and unengaged peers.

Motivation and engagement do not constitute a “warm and fuzzy” extra component of efforts to improve literacy. These interrelated elements are its primary vehicle. Although much is intrinsic to the student, research has found that teachers play a vital role in their students' motivation and engagement. Specifically, teacher's enjoyment and confidence in teaching, pedagogical efficiency, and affective orientations in the classroom have a positive impact on student motivation. Student engagement, described as the tendency to be behaviorally, emotionally, and cognitively involved in academic activities, is a key construct in motivation research. Hence, compared to less engaged peers, engaged students demonstrate more effort, experience more positive emotions and are more attentive in the classroom. Moreover, engagement has also been associated with positive student outcomes, including higher grades and decreased dropouts.

According to [Albert Bandura, 1997, p.160], confidence is akin to self-efficiency. Those teachers who are confident, or self-efficient have demonstrated: a) the ability to generate and test alternative courses of action when initial success is not met; b) enhanced functioning through elevated levels of effort and persistence; and c) enhanced ability to deal with a problem situation by influencing cognitive and emotional processes related to the situation. Conversely, according to [Albert Bandura, 1997, p.161] teachers with low confidence tend to dwell on their deficiencies and

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view situations as more difficult than they really are. Inadvertently, teachers high in confidence (self-efficacy) are more likely to engage in pedagogy that is characterized by positive, proactive, and solution-focused orientations, resulting in increased student motivation and engagement. Moreover, positive relationships with teachers enhance social, cognitive, and language development of students. According to [Cheryl Flink, Ann K. Boggiano and Marty Barrett, 1990] those teachers who support a student’s autonomy tend to facilitate greater motivation, curiosity, and desire to be challenged. Finally, positive relationships with teachers are associated with emotional, cognitive, and behavioral engagement in the classroom.

2. TIPS FOR ENHANCING STUDENT ENGAGEMENT AND MOTIVATION

The following tips may be of great help to teachers in developing student motivation and engagement:

- **Recognize and enhance one’s mental and physical stability.** Teaching is a stressful job, and it is imperative that teachers take care of their mental and physical selves. Teachers should engage in activities that are relaxing and physically challenging. Having an outlet to alleviate stress will radiate within the classroom and positively enhance student-teacher relationships. When teachers feel good about themselves, they have more patience for and better interaction with students.

- **Ensure a classroom environment welcoming students from all cultures.** To be engaged, students need to feel that they are in an environment where they are accepted and affirmed. During Business English classes students from different cultures are involved in common projects. For example, when discussing the topic “Culture”, foreign students share business culture peculiarities of their country. As a result, students become more open-minded and closer to each other.

- **Offer support and encouragement.** Additionally, student engagement is positively correlated to teacher’s support. Several studies have found that students who noted that their teachers were supportive and cared about their success were more likely to be engaged in the classroom and perform well academically. One study found that students who do not feel confident in their ability to succeed are not likely to attempt to do the work. Building a student’s confidence is not about falsely telling students how great they are. Instead, it is about assessing student weaknesses and strengths and developing ways to address them at developmentally appropriate yet rigorous levels. Additionally, acknowledging student academic growth and improvement is another way to build student confidence. It is crucial for teachers to “create collaborative, supportive environments with high but achievable standards” because it greatly affects students’ engagement in learning Business English. During Business English classes teachers have an individual approach towards their students thus encouraging all the students of the group to learn the language.

- **Manage student anxiety.** Some students find the prospect of not doing well so anxiety-inducing that it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. For these students, teachers may find that they are most motivated by learning that struggling with a subject isn’t the end of the world. They keep offering support no matter what the end result is and ensure that students don’t feel so overwhelmed by expectations that they just give up.

- **Enhance students’ self-belief.** Research shows that students engage when they act as their own learning agents working to achieve goals important to them. They must believe they can learn and know how to deal with failures and learn from those experiences. Teachers could incorporate problem-solving activities and provide discussions when failures occur. Problem-solving activities in Business English are based on analyzing various case studies, according to the curricula, simulating meetings and negotiations, etc. During these activities students are prone to act as in real life. Allowing students control over learning helps them develop confidence and commitment to learning the language.

Here are some **teaching strategies** to enhance students’ self-belief:

1. Offer praise and acknowledge students’ accomplishments, both in private and in front of their groupmates. Always start with a positive statement, and then you can add on by referring to what they need to work on.
2. Try not to correct every single thing the student says wrong. Do not interrupt the students when they are talking to correct them – this will harm their confidence, not boost it.

3. Set attainable goals from the start of the year. This is a sure way for students to see how much they have grown.
4. Give students the opportunity to choose what they learn -- this will help them build their self-worth. Try a learning menu or choice board where students get to choose which activities they want to learn about.
5. Be sure to always express a positive attitude to all of your students. This will show them that you are on their side, and that they are worth your attention.
6. Create opportunities for students to succeed by building on their strengths. If a student knows a lot of information about something, ask them to tell you about it. Asking students for their help is a great confidence boost to their ego.
7. Encourage students to do better than they did before. It's important for students to compete against themselves not their classmates.
8. Keep a log of how well all students are doing, and what they are good at and what they need to work on. This careful monitoring will help you solve problems as they arise.

- **Survey students to obtain information about their likes and dislikes.** Understanding what students like and dislike will provide suggested areas in which teachers can connect with the student. Information collected from the survey can be used as a motivator for academic and behavioral engagement or as a means of building rapport with the student. This allows teachers to relate the classroom material to things that students are interested in or have experienced. Teachers can use these interests to make things more exciting and relatable to students, thus keeping them motivated for longer and feeling themselves important and active participants of the learning process.

- **Allow students to work autonomously, enjoy learning relationships with peers and feel they are competent to reach their goals.** Allowing students to work autonomously and with others, developing their sense of competence, result in increased student motivation. This focuses on the cultivation of intrinsic motivation, which fosters self-determination that leads to engagement. Providing students with freedom of choice is one strategy for promoting learner autonomy. Educators commonly view this idea of choice through the lens of **organizational and procedural choice**. **Organizational choice** in education focuses on how the classroom and learning experiences are formatted. Organizational choice, for example, might mean students having a voice in setting assignments or choosing members of their small learning groups. When students are allowed to make organizational choices they may be more motivated participants in the learning community. **Procedural choices** in a classroom are those that involve how things are done. Procedural choice could include a choice from a list of homework assignments and what form a final project might take -- a poster, a presentation, a report, etc. Students may be more motivated and excited about learning when they have control over some of the content. When students are allowed to make choices, even small ones like what type of project they'll choose to show their understanding, they feel more connected to their work.

Some researchers, however, believe that the third option, **cognitive choice**, is a more effective way to promote longer-lasting student autonomy. This kind of cognitive autonomy support, which is also related to the idea of ensuring relevance, could include:

- ✓ Problem-based learning, where small groups need to determine their own solutions to teacher-suggested and/or student-solicited issues – ways to solve the problems faced after two companies have merged, strategies to improve communication within the company, etc.
- ✓ Students developing their own ideas for homework assignments related to what is being studied in the classroom.
- ✓ Students publicly sharing their different thinking processes behind solving the same problem or a similar one.

Cognitive choices require high-level thinking on the part of students as they need to be able to use skills like analyzing and evaluating. By being allowed to create assessments, students feel a deeper connection to learning experiences and may be motivated to work harder.

- **Developing metacognitive skills.** Metacognitive skills allow students to monitor their own comprehension effectively. That is, learners realize when they do not understand something or

when something does not make sense. Students with good metacognitive skills can use a variety of “fix-up” strategies when reading or listening, like rereading, listing or visualizing, questioning the text, relating the content to personal background, or using text aids to assist with comprehension. Weaker readers can learn the metacognitive strategies that stronger readers use. These strategies help weaker readers improve reading comprehension and, therefore, improve their content area learning. Being able to use metacognitive strategies independently as needed to strengthen and deepen literacy and learning is the ‘de facto’ definition of an “independent learner.” This sense of having more control over one's reading and learning through the development of metacognitive skills typically motivates students to sustain engagement.

- ***Create learning opportunities that are active, collaborative, and promote learning relationships.*** Active learning in groups, peer relationships, and social skills are key components to engagement and motivation. By developing a culture of achievement in the classroom where instruction are challenging make students feel comfortable asking questions, and expect them to do their best. For instance, a teacher might create an end-of-the-year academic goal for a group of students as a whole or a specific goal for each individual student. In order to show mastery of the goal, students must complete a research project or an oral presentation. For example, during Business English classes students might be asked to research a certain company and to make a presentation on its organizational chart, target market, product profile or the promotional tools used for their goods. Teachers need to select a goal that is challenging but attainable and find creative ways for students to work toward achieving the goal. Monitoring student progress throughout the year of study will also keep students focused academically and invested in their learning. When students feel challenged, they are less likely to be bored and disengaged. Teachers should aim at creating a culture in the classroom where learning is “cool”, and asking questions is not only good but expected. It may take some time to develop this type of environment, but it can be done by setting clear, high, consistent yet attainable expectations for all students. High quality instruction – one that is rigorous, aligned with content standards, and uses instructional strategies to meet the academic needs of all students – also is a key factor in promoting a culture of engagement and achievement in the classroom.

- ***Create educational experiences for students that are challenging and enriching, and that extend their academic abilities.*** Easy learning activities and assignments are not as effective at engaging students as activities and assignments that challenge them. When students are reflecting, questioning, conjecturing, evaluating, and making connections between ideas, they are engaged. Teachers must create rich educational experiences that challenge students’ ideas and stretch them as far as they can go. During Business English classes students take part in discussions on business issues, role play telephone conversations, participate in meeting, thus applying the vocabulary studied and developing their communication skills.

- ***Use modern technology during classes.*** The use of technology is often highly motivating to students in terms of getting them to read and write more carefully and with more effort. The ability to revise on the computer, to add effects (color, graphics, sound) to presentations, and to code or mark text using word processing features such as highlighting motivates many students, especially when this capability is combined with an authentic purpose to learn. Some students are much more likely to persevere with skill development if it is presented through a computer program or to complete an inquiry assignment if it is structured as a Web quest, Power Point presentation, etc. Modern technology is a useful and easy-to-use tool that helps students communicate their ideas to the audience.

- ***Concentrate on active learning and a relevant curriculum.*** Instructional strategies such as collaborative learning and experiential learning as well as designing an accessible and relevant curriculum have been shown to greatly increase student engagement in learning Business English too. Examples of these instructional strategies that might support student engagement include the following:

- ✓ Group activities and assignments
- ✓ Long-term projects
- ✓ Hands-on activities

- ✓ Differentiated instructions
- ✓ Problem-solving activities
- ✓ Lessons and activities that draw from students' background, interests and academic needs.

Students learn more and retain more information when they actively participate in the learning process and when they can relate to what is being taught. Drawing connections between information taught and real life - such as everyday life, social issues, and personal concerns of the age group of students - is highly effective in engaging students in the lesson. For instance, a high school English teacher should select persuasive writing topics that students can easily relate to. Research states that the extent to which students interests are incorporated is significantly related to their academic achievement. Research has also shown that the inclusion of students' interests and requirements in the learning process increases student engagement in learning. Therefore, positive student engagement can positively influence student achievement.

• ***Offer extracurricular activities.*** Student engagement in the classroom is also related to his/her participation in extracurricular activities. There has been proved that the students who are involved in extracurricular activities outside the normal school day are more engaged in the learning process. Extracurricular activities provide students with an opportunity to develop a positive support system among their peers and staff, which are also key components of fostering student engagement in the classroom. Teachers could offer “structured activity settings”—such as linguistic clubs, thematic events, and flash mobs on different topics studied. Participation in extracurricular activities can be very beneficial to the academic, social, physical, and emotional growth of students.

• ***Recognize that teaching and teachers are central to student engagement.*** Keeping up with the educational research through involvement in professional development activities (reading journals, attending workshops or webinars, training courses, conferences, etc.) is crucial for teachers who are prone to remain current in the field using effective, research-based strategies, and techniques, thus remaining proactive in developing student engagement.

CONCLUSION

There are many strategies that teachers can implement to greatly enhance student motivation and investment in their educational experience. Most of them depend a lot on the teacher because, as stated above, he or she plays a significant role in the teaching process. The teacher's personal and professional skills influence much the learning outcomes of the students and their attitude towards the subject. Hence, he/she should also be concerned with his/her own professional development. However, in order to be most effective in sustaining positive student engagement in learning and increase his/her academic performance, all these efforts should be consistent and continual throughout the academic year and throughout each student's educational career.

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