

6 Learners' Motivation to Speak English

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1 INTRODUCTION

Success or failure in language learning seems largely dependent on the learners' motivation to learn the target language. In particular, motivation seems very important in the development of speaking skills. I was prompted to do this study by an interest in finding out how I could help my Grade 2 learners develop motivation for speaking activities – my experience suggests that learners are very often not interested in participating in such activities. My reading on the subject of motivation and the increasing importance being given to speaking in the teaching of English in Oman were also part of the rationale for this study.

2 MOTIVATION & SPEAKING

2.1 Motivation

Richards & Schmidt (2002:343) define motivation as “the driving force in any situation that leads to action”. An important motivation theory is the expectancy-value theory. Richards & Schmidt (2002) report that this assumes people are motivated to do something they feel is worth doing and expect to succeed in doing. In discussion this theory, Dörnyei (2001) says there are two key factors: first, individual expectations of success; and secondly the value individuals put on success (or their negative fear of failure). If individuals have high positive feelings on both factors, they will have a high degree of positive motivation. If one of these factors is missing, they will be less motivated.

According to Dörnyei (2001) there are various factors that affect expectancy of success. These include past experiences (attribution theory), judging individual abilities and competence (self-efficacy theory) and maintaining self-esteem (self-worth theory).

Dörnyei (2001) refers to self-efficacy theory, which refers to individuals' thinking about their ability to carry out activities. He reports that self-efficacy is influenced

by previous performance and learning, as well encouragement from other people. He also reports that reactions such as anxiety and a low sense of self-efficacy in a demanding task means that individuals easily lose their belief in their ability to perform the task. As a result, they give up. This seems an important point in relation to my young learners and the English For Me materials. In contrast, according to Dörnyei (2001), a strong sense of self-efficacy builds confidence and increases effort to avoid failure. This relates to self-worth theory, because with high motivation individuals have a greater sense of personal value and worth. They think that if they experience failure that is due to some other reason, such as lack of time given to prepare for a test, rather than because they do not have the ability to pass the test.

Littlejohn (2001) identifies several sources of motivation, based on both intrinsic satisfaction and extrinsic rewards and success in performing tasks. He points out that perceptions of failure in the classroom may mean learners build a negative self-image of themselves as learners of English that builds up as they progress through school. He also describes a downward spiral in which perceptions of low ability lead to low motivation, which leads to low effort and low achievement. This low achievement in turn leads to low motivation again. Both Dörnyei (2001) and Littlejohn (2001) point out that self-esteem and confidence are crucial factors influencing motivation and that the self-esteem of learners is influenced by feedback from teachers. Littlejohn (2001) suggests that teachers consider evaluative and strategic feedback carefully and try to communicate a sense of optimism so learners develop can-do attitudes.

Littlejohn (2001) also suggests various strategies for teachers to maintain motivation. First teachers should experiment and vary classroom activities to see which activities individuals do best. They should also choose tasks that give learners the chance to make decisions about what to do. Furthermore, Littlejohn (2001) suggests choosing open-ended tasks with a range of possible responses and providing choice for learners to decide what to do.

Both Dörnyei (2001) and Littlejohn (2001) suggest the value of developing learner autonomy, involving learners in classroom decision-making and finding out what they think about lessons.

2.2 Speaking

According to McDonough & Shaw (1993), speaking is linguistic knowledge that creates an oral message for communication and self-expression. Bygate (1987) points out that speaking has two types of skills: lower level motor skills to do with pronunciation and the production of speech; and the decisions and strategies used in communicating ideas and information to do with choice of words. Arnold (2003) identifies other types of speaking. Firstly test-speak, when teachers use display questions to concentrate on grammar, and correct errors but do not give learners opportunities to speak for themselves. Secondly, talk-to speaking, when teachers speak constantly to explain grammar and vocabulary but do not give learners opportunities to participate. Arnold (2003) suggests teachers should use talking-with and real-speak to develop interactive speaking skills. She emphasizes real speaking for expressing learners' ideas and practising structures in personalized

contexts and suggests that this is essential for spoken fluency. She notes, however, that all this depends on the learners' willingness (i.e. their motivation) to participate; they may withdraw and refuse to speak. Consequently, interesting learners in speaking materials and activities is very important for developing their fluency.

Howarth (2006) discusses the problems facing teachers trying to increase oral interaction among learners. The first one is learner resistance: learners in monolingual classes may feel that group work and pair work are not authentic and that it is unnatural to speak a language with partners who speak the same L1. A second problem is self-consciousness, when learners feel nervous and embarrassed when asked to speak English. Next, Howarth (2006) points out the fact that it is difficult to monitor large classes who are doing pair or group work. There are also the associated risks of noise, bad behaviour and the use of the mother tongue. Howarth (2006) identifies two further factors that apply to my classroom: firstly, lack of motivation, so if the learners do not want to interact, they will not; secondly, insufficient language, so if the learners do not have enough English language, it will be difficult for them to interact.

3 METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Questions

My main research question here was 'what motivates my Grade 2 learners in speaking activities?'. I also examined these sub-questions: what are my learners' feelings about speaking activities? Can my learners do the speaking activities in the course book?

3.2 Participants

I selected a Basic Education Grade 2 class for my research. The children in this grade were mostly eight years old. There were 29 children in this class, all from a poor village near the mountains and where there is a weak literate environment. There were about 300 children in the school and it was run by a very kind headmistress who gave learners prizes for making progress and who encouraged them to do well even if they were low achievers. The classroom was organized into groups rather than rows, which makes speaking activities easier to organise. The learners were organized into six groups; most groups had six learners, both girls and boys. For this research I focused on six learners: two boys and four girls in a single group with a mixture of abilities from weak to good.

3.3 Data Collection

I adopted a case study approach. According to Johnson (1992), case studies gather detailed data from a single person, group, individual case or unit of analysis. In my study I focused on a small group of six learners. In this study I collected data through qualitative interviews.

I chose to interview the learners because I was interested in understanding their views about speaking activities. The interviews were conducted in Arabic to

encourage the learners to speak in more detail and without the pressure of using English. I did not audio record learners' answers because I felt that they might feel threatened by a tape recorder.

With each learner I focused on three specific issues. In the first interview I asked them to agree or disagree with a number of statements about their feelings about learning English and about different types of skills and activities (see Appendix 1). The second interview focused on their self-confidence (see Appendix 2). In the third interview I engaged the learners in a self-assessment exercise using a unit of material from English for Me Grade 2. These three interviews allowed me to collect in-depth information from each learner about their motivation in relation to speaking activities in learning English.

4 FINDINGS

4.1 First Interview

4.1.1 Preferred Skills

One of the questions in the first interview asked the learners to rank in order of preference the following activities: listening, speaking, reading and writing. I gave a value of 4 for the preferred activity in each case, followed by 3, 2 and 1 for the least preferred. Figure 1 presents the results of to this question. Listening activities were the most preferred while speaking activities were the least preferred.

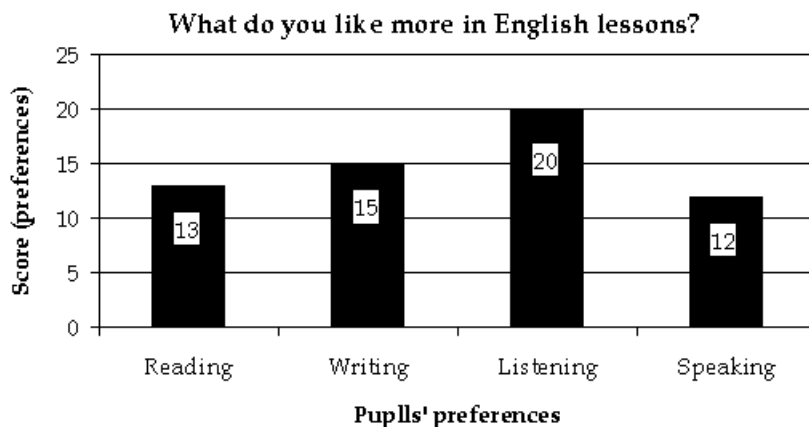


Figure 1: Learners' preferred skills in learning English

A closer look at learners' responses shows that none of the learners really liked speaking, although two of them rated it as their second preference. This is slightly surprising because we know that children naturally like to speak and it is not a natural impulse for young learners to remain silent during the learning process (Halliwell, 1992).

4.1.2 Preferred Activities

Another part of the first interview asked the learners to rank the following activities in order of preference: competitions, games, songs, spelling and stories. As above, their rankings were converted into numbers and Figure 2 presents the results..

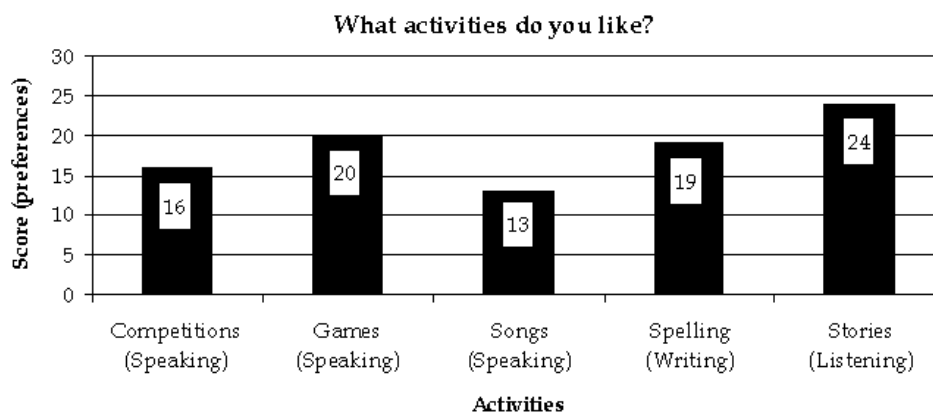


Figure 2: Learners' preferred classroom activities

Stories were rated most highly while songs were the activity least preferred. I was surprised by these findings as I had thought that children usually like fun activities, but these learners did not show any great preference for songs, games and competitions. In order to explore these responses further I conducted a second interview with each learner.

4.2 Interview on Self-Confidence

The questions for this interview are in Appendix 2. Most of the six case-study learners felt they were not ready to speak English because they did not know enough English yet. I expected these responses because I think learners at this primary stage are not confident enough to speak English even using the small amount of interlanguage they have. They are still in the preparation stage of listening or the silent period but later they will gradually produce the language (Lightbown & Spada 1999). This was supported by their responses to the second question. Two-thirds of the learners reported that they liked to speak English in class but again some reported they did not have enough English to do so.

Two of the learners said they did not like to speak English, one because he did not know English and the second said that she only sometimes liked to speak English with her friends because they would help her if she got stuck in speaking activities. Halliwell (1992) says that talk and interaction are one of children's instincts, so although the learners liked to interact with each other they felt they did not have enough language to use in interactions.

When in groups only two of the learners preferred to speak with all the other members of the group and one of these two learners said this was because his partner did not know English. All of the learners stated that they preferred to speak with the same sex; three of them commented on this. The first girl said that girls would help her in speaking activities if she did not know English but the boys would not help her. The second boy said that he liked to speak English with boys because they were from the same sex. Another girl said she preferred to speak with other girls because they were her friends. I think that all these learners did not feel confident and were shy of the opposite sex because of the nature of the Omani society and culture, which tends to separate male from female.

Most of the learners felt unsuccessful in learning English because they could not use English language skills, especially reading and speaking. Two of them agreed they felt only a little successful and another hesitated in agreeing but without making any comments, so I suspect that none of the learners felt confident about themselves as users of English.

Most of the learners felt the EFM speaking activities were not difficult but I thought that was not true so I asked them about their reasons. Two of them said their friends would help them. One of them said he could speak enough English. Two of them did not comment but only one learner said that speaking activities were difficult for him because he could not speak enough English. Most of them worried about making mistakes and reported feeling nervous when they spoke English because they do not know enough language. All of learners said they liked to think about what they wanted to say before speaking to be confident about their language.

Half of the learners felt that English lessons were fun; one learner was not sure about his answer so he replied that he did not know and two learners said that English lessons were not fun.

Most of the learners thought that they could speak about things from their real life. However, most of them felt that they were just copying the teacher's model because they were not confident of their abilities. All of the learners felt happy when they got good marks or heard words such as 'excellent' and 'well done' from the teacher.

Half of the learners felt that the teacher listened to them during speaking activities and the other half felt she did not listen to them. All of them felt the teacher would support them if they could not speak and most felt that their friends would help them if they got stuck during speaking activities.

4.3 Interview about Self-Assessment

To investigate more about their feelings and attitudes towards learning English I used an open-ended structured interview to find out about their abilities to do all the speaking activities in EFM Grade 2B. I asked the learners questions about Unit 6 from this book, basing my questions on the self-assessment activity in that unit. In particular I asked them whether they found the 10 speaking activities in the unit easy or not. Table 1 summarizes their answers.

Table 1: *Difficulty of speaking activities in EFM*

Learner	No. of activities felt to be 'easy' (out of 10)
1	4
2	8
3	4
4	4
5	-
6	7

Overall, then, only roughly half of the speaking activities in Unit 6 were felt by the learners to be easy. One point that came out of learners' comments during this interview was that their difficulties in reading had an impact on their willingness to speak. For example, Learner 1's comments suggested that although she knew the names of things (and could say the words) she had difficulty recognizing the words in written form. She stated that she had difficulty reading ("I cannot read"), which might have a significant negative effect on her willingness to speak in groups: the implication is that if she had difficulty recognizing words in written form then she would be unlikely to use target words in speaking activities. Similar issues came up with the other learners. As the reading input became more demanding, it seemed that learners' ability to participate in speaking activities also suffered.

5 DISCUSSION

This study highlights a number of issues relevant to understanding learners' motivation to participate in speaking activities in English lessons. First of all, the amount of English the learners know seems to be a problem for them. This seems to affect their motivation to speak in English. They do not seem to have reached the threshold they feel they need to use English confidently. Most of the six case study learners here thought that they were not ready to speak English because they do not know enough English yet. Clearly, we would not expect Grade 2 learners' oral proficiency to be high; what is interesting here though is learners' own negative views of their abilities in English – these views have an impact on their willingness to take part in spoken activities in the classroom. The learners also felt that they needed to be able to read better before they could do speaking activities (perhaps because the speaking activities they were asked to do required them to read and understand input in English first).

Their attitudes towards errors and their willingness to take risks were also relevant factors. Most of the case study subjects did not feel relaxed and they worried about making mistakes. They reported feeling nervous when they spoke English, again because they did not know enough English and so they were not confident. All of the learners reported that they liked time to think about what they wanted to say before speaking. They did not seem to be willing risk-takers.

The dynamics of interactive oral activities also seemed to pose a challenge for these learners. The learners generally did not express positive views about speaking to other children during group activities; they liked to talk to their friends or to get help when they were stuck, but they did not see the group as an opportunity to practise and improve their spoken English. Gender issues were important here too; all the learners in this study preferred to speak with other learners of the same gender. This has implications for learners' willingness to take part in oral activities involving mixed groups of boys and girls.

5.1 Limitations

I believe that the insights from this study are of general interest to teachers of English in Oman; I must, however, acknowledge that given the nature of the study I cannot claim that learners elsewhere have the same views about speaking activities as mine did here. One difficulty I experienced in this study was enabling learners to speak in a relaxed way during the interviews; even though I used Arabic, some learners still found it hard to grasp what precisely I was asking about. This was perhaps because some of my questions were too abstract for them; this is an important point to keep in mind in doing research with children. I also sensed at times that the children were hesitant to say what they really felt; they were concerned about providing answers that pleased me, because I was their teacher. Their reactions to me may have thus influenced the data I collected here.

6 CONCLUSION

Throughout Oman more emphasis is being placed on developing the English speaking skills of young learners. This study suggests that we need to pay more attention to learners' feelings about the speaking activities we ask them to do. We also need to analyze more critically what we can realistically expect learners to achieve orally in English in the first years of primary school. And above all I believe it is essential that greater awareness is created among teachers of the effect that learners' views of their own abilities have on their motivation to speak English. By being encouraging and supporting, and helping learners believe in their own potential, teachers have a key role to play in enhancing learner motivation and enabling them to develop not just their oral skills in English but their proficiency in the language generally.

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APPENDIX 1: THE FIRST INTERVIEW

The children were asked to agree or disagree with the following statements:

1. I enjoy learning English.
2. I think it is easy to learn English.
3. I think English will help me get a good job.
4. I think I need English for higher education.
5. I feel proud of my results in English.
6. I like to have a reward for doing well.

AND

1. I like to listen to English.
2. I like to speak English in class.
3. I like to speak English.
4. I like to read English.
5. I like to write English.

They were also asked to rank activities in order of preference:

- Listening activities
- Speaking activities
- Reading activities
- Writing activities

AND

- Competitions
- Games
- Songs
- Spelling
- Stories

APPENDIX 2: INTERVIEW ABOUT SELF CONFIDENCE

The children were asked to agree or disagree with the following statements:

1. I feel that I am ready to speak English
2. I like to speak English in class.
 - With all members of my group
 - Just in pairs
 - With my friends only
3. I prefer to speak with boys.
4. I prefer to speak with girls.
5. I prefer to sit at the back of the class in English lessons. (Why?)
6. I feel successful in learning English.
7. I feel that speaking activities are difficult for me.
8. I do not worry about making mistakes when I speak
9. I feel nervous when I speak English.
10. I feel relaxed when I speak English.
11. I like to think about what I will say before I speak.
12. I feel that English lessons are a lot of fun.
13. I can speak about things from my real life.
14. I feel that I am just copying the teacher's model of speaking.
15. I feel happy when I get good marks.
16. I feel happy when I hear words such as excellent, well done from the teacher.
17. I feel that the teacher is listening to me when I speak English.
18. I feel that teacher does not support me enough to be ready to speak.
19. I feel that teacher will support me if I stop speaking.
20. I feel that my friends will help me if I get stuck in speaking activities.