



# Cambridge English

# Teacher Development

## Motivating low-proficiency learners

### Motivating low-proficiency, poorly motivated learners

There are (roughly speaking) four types of low-proficiency learner:

- Some are weak in English because they may have been learning for a shorter time than their classmates; or perhaps they have come from another school where they received insufficient opportunity to progress or did not get enough encouragement. The great majority of students in this group need lots of attention, but they have a good chance of catching up if they get adequate attention.
- A second group is made up of learners with physiological learning disabilities such as poor hearing.
- A third group – fortunately not represented in all classes – is made up of children with severe psychological problems resulting, for instance, from traumatic experiences of one kind or another.
- It is a fourth sort of low-proficiency learner that most commonly disrupts the work of their classmates and gives teachers headaches. These are learners who are weak in English largely because their motivation is low. They attach little importance to all the reasons for learning that we teachers and their better motivated classmates can see: reasons such as gaining knowledge for qualifications and career, experiencing the fascination of discovery, and making one's parents and teachers happy. These poorly motivated learners are rarely persuadable by such arguments as *This will all be very useful to you one day*. With such learners it is exceptionally important that your lessons be not just useful (since denial of usefulness may be part of their basic attitude) and well managed (since this too may be unappreciated) but also interesting and varied. *Language Activities for Teenagers* can help here.

So, what is it, in general, that can make a lesson interesting for 11- to-16-year-olds, even ones with low motivation? Let us look at 10 features of interesting lessons, points (a) to (j) below, and then consider an example activity, 'Flash the picture'.

- a. First, variety is important. A lesson of, say, 50 minutes, should consist of at least three – perhaps four to six – distinct components. In some lessons, these components may be the different stages of a single overall activity which is long but varied. In others, they may belong to two or more separate activities.
- b. Activities, and the steps that make them up, should have clearly understood and achievable goals. Ideally, there should also be a tangible or at least observable outcome: a learner's text, for example, or a performance.
- c. Activities with game-like elements are usually very good for generating interest. Such elements include:
  - a degree of competition



- a goal which is about something other than getting the language right. One example of this kind of goal is identifying as many differences between two pictures as possible within a short time limit; another is solving a brainteaser.
- d. A major means of maintaining interest is use of activities that require and encourage learners to use the target language for communication of interesting messages.
- e. Extensive use of non-language stimuli such as pictures, objects, mime, music and sound effects is crucial if your class includes poorly motivated students.
- f. Almost anything you can do to make classwork personally relevant will help. If, for instance, you want learners to speak about an object, let it be one that is special to them for some reason – an object, perhaps, that has sentimental value or one they use in connection with a pastime they enjoy.
- g. It is always wise to try to discover what topics are of current interest to the age group you are teaching and try to include them, somehow, in your lessons.
- h. Periodic opportunity to move about, or at least stand and move, is highly beneficial to learners in this age range and can contribute to keeping interest up.
- i. Humour is important too. Of course, there is no recipe for this. But if you create the right sort of atmosphere and show your sense of humour as often as you can, more humour will come from your learners. (For more on this, see Medgyes, 2002.)
- j. Finally, occasional surprises can help keep learners interested and paying attention.

Few activities will include all of these features, but let us look at one that includes several:

## Flash the picture

Age	Any
Time	5 minutes
Level	Any (see Variation for beginners, below)
Focus	Nouns and prepositions especially, but other elements of language too, depending on the picture
Material	A large picture on stiff paper or a copy on OHP transparency

## Preparation

Choose a picture large enough for everyone to see or copy one onto an OHP transparency. This activity works best with scenes (especially ones that suggest a scenario) which include just a few visually salient people (or things) plus various less salient details.

## Procedure

1. Flash or show the picture for a very short time – a second or less.
2. Ask learners to say what they saw.
3. Repeat Steps 1 and 2.
4. Show the picture for three or four seconds.
5. Repeat Step 2.
6. Display the picture and keep it in full view. Elicit or teach useful vocabulary and elicit as much comment as you can, for example:
  - facts about what is shown, e.g. If there is a tool, what is it for?
  - speculations about what has just happened or what is going to happen
  - speculations about people's motives for what they are doing



- interpretations: if the scene is somewhat mysterious or ambiguous
- solutions: if the scene shows people in a problem situation
- opinions: if the scene suggests a controversy
- personal associations, e.g. ask, Does the picture remind you of anything? Has anyone here ever been in a situation like this?

(For variations to 'Flash the picture' see 2.3, p. 46.)

Comment (compare with a–j on the previous page)

Among the features that make 'Flash the picture' a potentially interesting activity are these:

- a. The use of a picture can provide a welcome break from focusing directly on words and texts.
- b. The activity has a clear purpose: to revise or teach the vocabulary and grammar needed to talk about a particular picture.
- c. The fact that the picture is only flashed (in the beginning) means that anyone who pays close attention has a good chance of noticing something that others will fail to see. Thus, a mood of game-like competition readily develops but, because the activity is brief, it is unlikely to get out of hand.
- d. Because different learners will notice or think different things about the picture, communication is encouraged. In other words, 'Flash the picture' is communicative because there is an 'information gap' or an 'opinion gap'.
- e, f, g. You can choose pictures that relate to topics of current interest to your learners.
- j. Learners may not expect a picture to be used in this way. They may also be surprised by how much they notice during one brief flash.

In addition to choosing activities with potential to be interesting and useful, there are a few additional things one can do in order to help low-level, poorly motivated learners to learn:

- Try to *use the truth rule* regularly in small ways. This helps poorly motivated learners to recognise that English can be useful for saying real things here and now.
- Everyone knows that nothing builds motivation like success, so *make your lessons success-oriented*. Design or choose tasks which set everyone achievable aims. In mixed-proficiency classes, flexible activities have a role to play here. One tactic in particular that may get poorly motivated learners to perform better is to set very low minimums but then also include an apparently minor requirement which encourages them to exceed the minimum. For example, asking poorly motivated learners to talk in pairs about what they did at the weekend may not work as well as asking one partner to say two very short true sentences about their weekend. Their partner should then say *Because . . . ?* at least twice. And the first speaker then has to provide the reasons.

A variation is to set an intriguing frame of some kind that looks small and easy to add something into – either a little or a lot, depending on how much a student can or wants to say. This is often equivalent to designing a core task which is easy for everyone in the class to do, including the weaker students, plus a challenging extra for students who are more proficient.

## Variations

- Find two pictures which (1) show the same things but in different places or (2) show basically the same things but with a dozen or so minor differences (e.g. in one picture a



woman has a scarf and in the other she does not). Display the picture (and keep it displayed). Flash the other one. Elicit differences.

- Write a description of a picture which differs in about a dozen details from the picture you are going to flash. Make a class set of the text, hand it out and give everyone time to read it. Flash your picture. Elicit differences between the text and the picture.
- For a longer, more competitive activity, form mixed-proficiency teams of four or five. In each team, choose as secretary one of the team's least proficient members. Tell everyone they will have to whisper within their teams so that competing teams will not be able to hear them. Flash the picture for just a few seconds. Secretaries write lists of people and objects seen. Call time. Collect the lists. Declare a winner. Hold up the picture and elicit comment about it. Repeat with two or three other pictures.

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I learned the main activity at Pilgrims in 1985.

From *Language Activities for Teenagers* by Seth Lindstromberg, 2004

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