



# Cambridge English

## Teacher Development

### Using Action Research to find ways to motivate your learners

#### Motivation

It is very important for teachers to understand what motivates their learners. There are many different reasons why learners want to learn a language. There may be **extrinsic** motivators such as wanting to get a promotion at work or a good grade in an English examination. On the other hand, learners may be motivated more by their own desire to learn the language; when a learner's motivation comes from within, we call this **intrinsic** motivation.

Most learners will have more than one reason for learning English, and their reasons may change over time. Learners' motivation may be very strong at some times, but become weaker at others, perhaps because they feel they are not making enough progress or because their external motivators are no longer influencing them (for example, they have completed their English exam). It is important that the teacher is able to identify how strong learners' motivation is, and what factors may make the motivation stronger or weaker.

The teacher needs to be able to plan effectively, making sure that the classroom activities are motivating for the learners. For example, if learners are not planning to take any exams, it may be very demotivating for them if the teacher uses exam related resources. Teachers need to consider how to maintain and improve learners' motivation when planning lessons and courses.

Many teachers report that their learners do not seem very motivated at all. In this article we look at how Action Research can be used to help you understand what motivates your learners, and develop and evaluate activities which might increase their motivation.

#### Action Research

Action Research is a process which teachers can use to develop their teaching. There are many other processes which can also help teachers develop, such as Team Teaching or Observation. However, Action Research is one of the most common and effective, and it has the advantage in that it is a process which teachers can easily initiate and control on their own.



Action Research involves conducting a short research project with a group of learners. It is both local and specific, requiring the teacher to work with the actual group(s) of learners the teacher is currently teaching. It does not place a great deal of extra demands on a teacher's time, because it is mostly carried out during the normal class time. In addition, it is flexible in that teachers can carry out research by themselves, or work collaboratively with other teachers interested in the same topic.

## Your Action Research Project

You are going to carry out an Action Research project, using your existing group(s) of learners, on the theme of **motivation**. Action Research projects consist of a series of seven "steps" which outline what you need to do; you are going to follow these seven steps. They represent a well-established framework for experimenting with and reflecting on your teaching practice.

1. **Identify a Change.** Firstly, you have to identify something which you would like to research, and potentially to change. This could be any aspect of teaching and learning, but here we are focussing especially on learners' motivation. This may be expressed as a question. So, for your Action Research project, you might ask the question '*Are the activities you do in class motivating for your learners?*' You can choose another question related to motivating your learners if you prefer, but make sure that it is simple and easy to understand, both for yourself and others. (Examples of other questions might be, '*What motivates my learners to learn English? How do different activities affect my learners' motivation? Is my learners' motivation increasing or decreasing?*')
2. **Observe the present situation.** Consider your group(s) of learners and look again at the class profile(s) you may have already written. Make notes or use a questionnaire to find out more about their motivation generally, and about whether specific activities motivate your learners. Look at an example of a questionnaire at the bottom of this page. Try to adapt this questionnaire, or create your own questionnaire which is suitable for your learners.
3. **Plan your intervention.** An intervention is an action which you take to change the situation. For example, if you are researching whether your class is motivated by your activities, you can plan alternative activities which may be more motivating, in order to compare how your learners respond to them. You could use some of the activities suggested by Penny Ur in Ten Tips for Keeping Learners Interested in Week 3. For example, you could increase the use of visuals in reading classes, in order to stimulate and motivate visual learners, or you could try to vary your activities more, alternating activities involving challenging reading texts with shorter and lighter speaking activities. These are just two examples of the kinds of changes to your activities you might make, but there are many more ideas on the Cambridge English Teacher website.
4. **Carry out the intervention.** This is where you try out the new techniques or ideas you planned in step 3. This means doing something new. It might seem difficult or awkward to try something you haven't done before but don't worry, the aim of Action Research is not to suddenly improve everything, but to make small or gradual changes and observe the effects carefully. Don't be afraid to take risks, the purpose of Action Research is to try out new things and reflect on whether they are successful.



5. **Observe the effects of the intervention.** It's very important that you pay close attention to the effects of the changes you have made. You could do this by using another questionnaire, or by talking to your learners about whether they found the new activities enjoyable and motivating, or you could simply observe your learners carefully. But don't evaluate your project at this stage, as this should wait until after the intervention is complete. You may also find it useful to have a colleague come and observe your class(es) to see the effects of your changes, if this is possible.
6. **Evaluate your results.** Next you look carefully over your notes and observations and draw conclusions. Do you think it is a good idea to try more of the new activities, based on your experience in the project? What other conclusions can you draw about how to motivate your learners?
7. **Publish and share your findings.** Teachers are often reluctant to discuss what is happening in their classes, but the key final step in the Action Research process is to share what you have learned in your project with other teachers. You might do this online using a teachers' forum, or you might join in discussions with your teaching colleagues. You will find that other teachers will be very interested in what you have learned, and eager to hear about your experiences. You should also take an interest in what they have found out from their own projects.

### Tips for a successful Action Research project

1. **Keep it simple.** Action Research is meant to help teachers in their daily lives; it is not intended to be the basis of more extended research projects such as at Masters level. So, don't plan to make enormous changes to what you normally do, and make sure you can complete your research comfortably within your normal working schedule.
2. **Don't give yourself too much work to do.** Try to make sure that your project will not require too much additional planning or preparation of resources, as this may overwhelm you and then you might find yourself losing motivation to complete the project.
3. **Work with others.** If it's possible, try working with another teacher or group of teachers on your research project. For example, you might all choose the same research question and compare your results with one another. Alternatively, you might choose different research questions, but help each other by observing one another teaching.
4. **Don't prejudge the outcome.** Don't assume that you know the answers to your research question before you begin. Try to keep an open mind, and make sure that you observe carefully what is happening in your classes.
5. **Use what you have found out.** You can use your own conclusions from your project to improve your teaching. Don't be afraid of integrating your ideas into your future lesson planning. The aim of Action Research is to give you a framework in which you can help yourself and develop your own ideas and practice.

Good luck, and don't forget to look on the Cambridge English Website for more ideas for your Action Research project.



## Example of a Learner Questionnaire

Adapted from an example of a questionnaire about motivation and progress, from McCrossan Laura (2011) Progress, motivation and high level learners, *Research Notes* 44, p 6-9 Cambridge English Language Assessment.

*I'd like you to fill out this questionnaire for me, to help with my research project into student progress and motivation. I'd like you to answer all the questions as honestly as you can, and please think carefully about your progress goal, this should be an area of your English that you really want to improve (it can be as detailed as you like).*

Name:

Age:

Date:

1. How long have you been studying English?
2. Why are you studying English?
3. Do you have positive feelings about studying English. If not why?
4. Do you think that your progress affects your motivation?
5. Which classroom activities do you find motivating?
6. Which classroom activities do you find demotivating?
7. What is your progress goal?
8. How can I help you to achieve this goal?