Building an integrative classroom

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The gap between a teacher’s desire for classroom engagement and a student’s motivation can sometimes lead to a frustrating struggle for control in the classroom. Understanding what is happening beneath the surface in such situations can help teachers to select techniques that build relationships and increase the likelihood of engagement.

Key words: motivation, autonomy, relationships, strengths-based, ESL, participation, integrative

Teaching can be incredibly rewarding, but it doesn’t always feel that way. A 2019 PDK poll shows that 50% of teachers are thinking about quitting, with stress cited as a major factor, and Gallup found that 48% are actively looking for a way out of the field (Gewertz, 2019; McFeely, 2018). And it’s more than just daydreaming—9.5% of teachers actually do quit during their first year and a further 40-50% leave after five years (Riggs, 2013). Low salaries and high workloads contribute to the problem, but there’s more to it than that. It also comes down to what happens in the classroom and how that affects teacher well-being (Shen et al., 2015). Working with students means working with people, and working with people isn’t easy.

When those people are English as a Second Language (ESL) students, the work can be especially complex. In addition to navigating the standard life stage hurdles common to all children and young adults, ESL students face acculturative stresses and questions of identity that can significantly impact their ability to learn (Berry, 1997; Ushioda & Dörnyei, 2009). Much of this happens below the surface, with struggling students often presenting as simply unmotivated or “difficult.” Although it can often feel challenging to engage with such students, developing a perspective that takes their struggles into account and using techniques that show understanding can help teachers to foster a positive classroom atmosphere that draws students into communication. In advocating for such an approach, this article draws on existing research in the areas of motivation and strengths-based systems theory, my own journey as an ESL instructor, findings on the importance of relationships in the ESL classroom, and counseling techniques that can help to build those relationships.

Motivation

When it comes to ESL students who appear unmotivated or “difficult,” it helps to understand how motivation works. Research suggests that intrinsic motivation (internal personal interest) is the optimal learning fuel, resulting in higher rates of learning, achievement, attendance, and graduation (Froiland & Worrell, 2016). To build intrinsic motivation, however, students need to feel autonomous (Rudy et al., 2007; Ryan & Deci, 2011). The idea is that we are at our most motivated when we feel like we have the power (autonomy) to take an active hand in our own happiness. The downside of all this is that none of us are completely autonomous; we all depend to some degree on others in pursuing our goals. If that dependency overshadows our sense of autonomy, intrinsic motivation dissipates and performance declines (Ryan & Deci, 2011). When this happens, our reactivity to stress increases and cognition necessary to memory and learning suffers (Hill et al., 2018; Yaribeygi et al., 2017).
ESL students living and studying in the L2 culture are an at-risk group when it comes to such losses. For starters, moving into a new culture with limited language skills entails a complex process of mental and behavioral adjustment that can undermine a student’s sense of autonomy (Berry, 1997; Rudy et al., 2007). Students who are unsure of how to get their needs met in the L2 environment may be dealing with lower levels of intrinsic motivation, greater stress reactivity, and a decreased ability to learn. The problem can be unknowingly compounded by teachers who attempt to supply motivation extrinsically (from outside forces) via coercive rewards and punishments. External inducements are only effective if the “norms, rules, and values” behind them have been internalized by the student; if they have not been internalized, the student may simply see the coercive tactics as yet another threat to their autonomy (Ryan & Deci, 2011). If all of this goes unaddressed, the student and the teacher are in danger of entering a cyclical process of demotivation. Students who present as unmotivated or “difficult” may cause teachers to feel stressed, and a teacher who displays high levels of stress further harms student motivation (Harmsen et al., 2018; Shen et al., 2015). The result can be a push-and-pull between student motivation and teacher desire for engagement that fossilizes into a pattern of frustration and obscures the benefits of the classroom system.

**Strengths-based systems theory**

If looking at how motivation works can serve to highlight some of the dangers facing ESL students, strengths-based systems theory can illustrate some of the positives. In social work, systems theory holds that systems and the individuals who participate in them are mutually dependent. At its best, this mutual dependence helps us to meet our needs and to engage in positive growth (Hutchison, 2015; Rothery, 2016). When the benefits of mutual dependence are obscured, however, problems arise and needs go unmet.

To break a cyclical process of demotivation and restore healthy mutual dependence, it helps to address how we view the classroom. A control-based perspective that relies overmuch on extrinsic motivation via coercive punishments and rewards assumes student belief in its legitimacy, undervalues the benefits of intrinsic motivation, and puts too much responsibility for learning and growth on external agents like teachers (Ryan & Deci, 2011). In my own experience, a control-based perspective also tends to place undue stress on instructors because it sees engaged classrooms as depending entirely on flawless lesson design, the application of power, and a superhuman ability to motivate.

A strengths-based systems theory perspective takes a different view. It starts with the assumption that each student in the classroom has the strength to pursue their natural inclination towards growth and learning (Shulman, 2016; Simmons et al., 2016). It does not assume that students are always acting on this natural inclination. It simply assumes that the strength to do so exists within each student and that it is more likely to manifest given the right conditions. From this perspective, the job of the teacher is to facilitate access to concepts and “to recognize that resistant behavior has meaning” (Shulman, 2016, p. 124).
The perfect teacher myth
When I first began teaching ESL in 2005, I didn’t know anything about motivation or strengths-based systems theory. In fact, the first teacher training seminar I attended was at an institute in which the trainer gave the following advice—never admit mistakes. Airtight lesson plans would impress students and eliminate error. If I did make a mistake, admitting it would only undermine my authority as an instructor. It was horrible advice that presented teaching as being entirely about knowledge transmission and applying this advice put up a wall between myself and my students. When confronted with students who weren’t engaged or motivated, my primary tools were extrinsically-oriented power moves. I could threaten them with poor grades, I could punish them by sending them out of the room to speak to someone with more power, I could shame them in front of others, or I could blame them for not applying themselves. Mostly, I went home and wondered why I’d gotten into teaching.

Eventually, out of sheer desperation, I started telling stories. When my students were running out of energy, and when I’d either exhausted my power moves or gotten sick of using them, I told stories about growing up in rural New England. I told stories about my friends and I trying, and often failing, to evade the various dogs guarding the local farms so that we could steal fistfuls of rhubarb and raspberries. I told them stories of how I would spend hours convincing my younger brother to join me in stunts that would leave both of us injured and a story about a tree falling on a friend at his own birthday party. And that’s how it went—my students and I would exhaust whatever motivation they had, we’d exhaust my ability to coerce them into participating, I’d dig into my library of stories, and then we’d repeat the cycle. Each time I told stories, I’d feel like we were connecting, but then I’d worry about wasting classroom time and I’d try to be a “real” teacher again. I hadn’t found my groove in the classroom, but I could see that the storytelling was having a positive impact on my relationship with my students.

The importance of relationships
I was beginning to understand that extrinsically-based knowledge transmission isn’t the only way to frame teaching and that relationship matters in the classroom. To borrow a quote from Dr. Thomas Gordon’s (2003) Teacher Effectiveness Training, I was learning that “school isn’t cramming a lot of stuff into the heads of the students. It’s helping them get ready to grab ideas and concepts when they can and how they can” (p. 43). U.S.-based second language learners of all levels may come into the classroom freighted not only with everyday motivational factors like quantity of sleep and level of hunger, but also with different culturally-based educational schema and complex psychological acculturation processes that affect their ability to build intrinsic motivation (Berry, 1997; McCargar, 1993; Rudy et al., 2007; Ryan & Deci, 2011). Since most students have neither the training nor the vocabulary to identify all of the motivational factors affecting them, it often falls to the teacher to begin building a communicative learning atmosphere that “helps them get ready” to learn by giving them a safe space to express themselves and build a sense of control. In this context, positive teacher-student working relationships can have a significant bearing on student motivation (Daniels & Piayoff, 2015).

The teacher-student working relationship also matters because so much of what happens in the ESL classroom requires collaborative communication. Integrativeness, a key factor in second
language motivation, has been defined as “a genuine interest in learning the second language in order to come closer to the other language community” (Gardner, 2001 as cited in Ortega, 2009, p. 170). Without that motivation to come closer to the language community, language learning decreases or halts entirely (Benson, 2001; Dörnyei, 1998; Guilloteaux & Dörnyei, 2008; Lam, 2009; Rees-Miller, 1993; Spratt et al., 2002; Zimmerman et al., 1992). If we think of the ESL classroom as being a system that establishes its own culture through discourse and which requires a certain level of acculturation, what happens there can have a significant effect on whether a student wants to “come closer” and communicate (Baek & Choi, 2002; Berry, 1997; Poole, 2005; Schmitz, 1997).

A teacher's focus on control and the use of extrinsically-focused power moves like threatening, punishing, shaming, and blaming can turn the classroom into an environment that actually decreases intrinsic motivation and drives the student away from the language learning community (Ortega, 2009). It’s no coincidence that control-focused behaviors like threatening, punishing, shaming, and blaming are also labeled as elements of abusive relationships by the Duluth Domestic Abuse Intervention Program (DAIP, n.d.). The injudicious use of power, in short, is corrosive and unlikely to foster integrativeness.

**Applying counseling techniques**

When it comes to building an integrative classroom environment, I’ve found that using counseling techniques from the field of social work is an efficient way to build rapport. Skills like *Tuning In*, *I-Messages*, and *Active Listening* allow me to communicate the understanding and acceptance necessary for strengthening classroom relationships without adding an undue burden to classroom work.

**Tuning In to the student**

The skill of Tuning In is a key element in this process because it asks teachers to “try to experience the client’s feelings” and to try “to get in touch with their own feelings” (Shulman, 2016, p. 91, 93). Social categorization is the often unconscious process of categorizing people, and it’s important to acknowledge because how we categorize people determines how we treat them (Liberman et al., 2017). Tuning In is a way of slowing down this process and making it more conscious so that we categorize compassionately and with a sense of purpose. It does this through three stages: tuning in to general categories occupied by the student, tuning in to specific knowledge about the student, and tuning in to what’s happening in class (Shulman, 2016).

Tuning In to general categories involves building compassion by thinking about what it’s like to be an “ESL student” or an “adolescent.” When I was living abroad, taking language classes usually wasn’t the highlight of my day. And as a teenager, there were many days when I was physically present in the classroom but mentally elsewhere. Keeping this in mind helps me to be less judgemental when I have a student who isn’t participating—I can think about the general forces affecting them and I can then approach them in a more understanding manner.

After Tuning In to my students generally, I can then Tune In to my unmotivated or “difficult” students specifically. What do I know about them individually? Are there relationship issues? A substance abuse problem? When a student is distracted due to such issues, a punitive approach
probably isn’t going to change their behavior because it doesn’t affect the root cause of the problem. As a university-level instructor, I’ve had students who are unable to concentrate in class because they’re heartbroken, hungover, or distracted by other issues. Coercing them into participating has never worked for me—their physical and emotional states don’t change because I want them to. Rather than fight a battle I’m not going to win, I prefer to use the moment to build our communicative relationship. If I can tell them it’s okay and that we’ll try again in the next class, I’m able to communicate care and understanding. This approach has worked for me—I’ve had conversations with students that contextualized their behaviors, brought us to greater understanding, and enhanced our ability to work together in the classroom. To me, it’s what makes teaching worth doing. While such a stance might seem overly permissive, research has shown it to be effective—data from the Children of Immigrants Longitudinal Study, which looked at 5,262 children with immigrant parents, have shown that supportive work in the classroom mitigates problems stemming from acculturation issues and negative developmental patterns (Haller et al., 2011).

Although it’s good to start with a student-centered approach, both generally and specifically, it’s also a good idea to Tune In to the class as an environment in order to find opportunities to make the atmosphere integrative. When I do this, it mostly involves me thinking about how the room feels or what activities do or don’t work. In regard to the way my classrooms feel, I find that speaking up in an otherwise silent room can be an extremely uncomfortable experience. To mitigate this, I play music at a moderate volume in all of my classes both because it takes the edge off what can otherwise be an oppressively quiet atmosphere and because, sooner or later, my students get sick of hearing my lo-fi hip hop playlists looping endlessly in the background. Eventually they start making song requests and asking to DJ from their own laptops, and then we have a communication point. In a similar fashion, I find that some classes can be reluctant to participate in mock negotiations or discussions. Instead of railing on about the need to participate, I create assignments that are intentionally onerous and, when my students object, I pretend that I’m on the fence and draw them into a discussion or negotiation about making the assignment easier. It doesn’t take them long to catch on to the fact that I’m always swayed in the end, and negotiation and discussion around work becomes a natural part of the class. Tuning In to the classroom environment and the structure of each class is about trying to find adjustments that contribute to a more comfortable and integrative learning environment.

**Tuning In to the self**

Tuning In to the self is where teachers get in touch with their own feelings and think about how managing those feelings can either enhance or detract from the learning environment (Shulman, 2016). If I haven’t slept well or if something is bothering me, I’m far more likely to see problems than if I’m rested and happy. Teachers are human beings, as subject to exhaustion and frustration as anyone else. Trying to hide our feelings is impractical, both because we rarely hide our emotions as well as we think we do and because the research suggests that sharing helps to create a positive environment. It’s been found to foster trust, co-constructive interaction, and enhanced communicative competence while reducing acculturative stress (Cait, 2016; Hou et al., 2018; Shulman, 2016). Much like playing music or creating negotiative opportunities, sharing feelings is a small tweak that can act as a communicative point.
I-Messages
I-Messages are another healthy way to create an integrative atmosphere because they can enhance clarity and minimize defensiveness by removing negative evaluation (Gordon, 2003). They consist, first and foremost, of a factual report on a specific student behavior devoid of negative editorializing. Saying “When I see you using your phone in class . . .” is better than “When you’re inconsiderate . . .” (p. 143). The second part of an I-Message addresses the “tangible or concrete [emphasis in the original] effect on the teacher” (p. 144). It could be something like “When I see you using your phone in class, I start thinking about how I’m going to have to repeat everything for you later.” The third part of an I-Message is where the teacher expresses the feelings associated with the tangible effect—“When I see you using your phone in class, I start thinking about how I’m going to have to repeat everything for you later and I get frustrated” (p. 145). I-Messages are honest, separate the problem from the person, and avoid the resentment that teachers can feel when students fail to pick up on their indirect messages.

Active Listening
When students do communicate, it’s important to listen carefully and authentically. Active listening skills involve paraphrasing what a student says to verify meaning, asking follow-up questions, and using non-verbal cues that show attention (Jones et al., 2019). The overall goal is to use the opportunity to learn more about the student’s world and develop connection. In a study involving 115 conversational pairs, researchers found that it’s worth the effort—active listening made participants feel more understood and enhanced their willingness to communicate (Weger et al., 2014).

Active listening, when done correctly, is not easy. The urge to advise or judge can be hard to suppress. When I first started teaching, my students would talk about their daily plans and I would advise them to study instead. My students eventually stopped telling me their plans and, even worse, they started telling me what I wanted to hear. They were learning not to take communicative risks and it was negatively affecting communication in the classroom. The problem was that my listening wasn’t student-centered, and I was challenging the legitimacy and quality of what I was hearing (Jones et al., 2019). Tuning In to the self and sharing feelings is important, but it’s also important to be mindful of the impact on the integrative atmosphere. Now, when my students talk about their plans, I listen actively both to show that I care and that it’s safe to communicate. If I want to comment, I use I-Messages and I respect the student’s right to have a different opinion. I save the judgement for grading, where it belongs, and I save my advice for when a student asks for it.

Conclusion
I’ve focused on motivation, strengths-based systems theory, research on relationships, and counseling techniques in this article because these are the things that have helped me the most as a teacher. I came very close to being one of the 40-50% of teachers who walk away after the first five years because I didn’t feel good about my work in the classroom. I didn’t like that my students and I always seemed to be at odds, and I didn’t want to spend my days coercing people into participating. Coming to the realization that teaching is less about knowledge transmission
and more about cultivating the optimal conditions for people to pursue their natural inclination toward growth and learning changed how I felt about the classroom.

Before I bring this to a close, I want to note that the framework I’ve presented here does not preclude the judicious use of teacher power when needed. There is nothing wrong with failing a student who hasn’t done the work or asking a disruptive student to leave the room. Like any other teacher, I have done both of these things. The trick is to do it in the context of a caring atmosphere that objects to the behavior in question and not to the student as a person. Building that atmosphere is not an easy process—it takes mindfulness, self-regulation, and patience. Teachers are only people, and our ability to manifest these qualities is better on some days than it is on others. The good thing about building a caring and understanding learning environment is that it’s forgiving for all involved—students and teachers.
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Feature Image