

## 7 Motivation and the Learner

Motivation is arguably the most important single factor in success or failure at language learning. A well-motivated student badly taught will probably do better than a poorly-motivated student well taught. Motivation determines the student's level of attention during class, and the assiduity with which he does his homework and revises what he has been taught during the day. It certainly has a deep influence on the effectiveness of learning.

### 1 Psychological factors

Exactly what motivates students of English is difficult to determine and in any case it varies from one situation to another and from one person to another. Much motivation is external in that it does not stem from the quality of the teaching or the teaching materials at all, but from social, economic and other factors.

#### 1.1 Shorter-term objectives

There is evidence which shows that by setting realistic and attainable shorter-term objectives and by using materials which lead the pupil unambiguously towards those objectives, motivation can be considerably improved.

This claim is most obviously borne out in the developing area of ESP, where learners are taught to perform certain kinds of communicative acts in well-defined situations which are directly relevant to their education or employment and therefore to their personal advancement. Robinson (1980) refers to the 'purposefulness' of an ESP learning situation and Brumfit (1977) places ESP 'firmly within the general movement towards "communicative" teaching'.

Setting specific and relevant shorter-term objectives in the context of general language teaching is both feasible and beneficial. Buckby (1981) reports that the use of graded (short-term) objectives and tests in foreign language learning in British comprehensive (secondary) schools resulted in 'very significantly more positive attitudes... at all points of the aptitude scale' together with a significantly higher percentage of pupils opting for foreign language learning when it became optional (usually at the age of thirteen or fourteen) than the national average.

#### 1.2 Appealing materials

Other points that we should look for in teaching materials are variety and pace, attractive appearance and feel, activities leading to personal involvement and 'self-investment' in the learning process, and activities with a competitive or problem-solving element in them.

A coursebook that is going to interest a learner should contain something that he wants to learn about or involve himself in, quite apart from the language itself. English should come over as a means of conveying messages of consequence and relevance and as a means through which one's experience is enriched and widened. It could well be presented as a 'window on the world'.

### 1.3 Whole-person approach

In the context of relevance to the learner, mention must be made of what has been called the whole-person approach to learning which derives from the *humanistic movement* in education. A very readable summary of humanistic values in education and their application to the language learning process can be found in Moskowitz (1978, chapters 1 and 2). Essentially it is concerned with developing and bringing into play all aspects of the learner's personality, and not just the cognitive or intellectual side. Consequently a good deal of emphasis is placed on the expression of feelings and attitudes on the part of the learner, together with a sense of sharing and supportiveness in the class as a whole.

Stevick (1980) applies humanistic values to materials evaluation in an informal way and suggests that 'whole-learner' materials should meet a number of criteria:

- (a) There should be something for the emotions as well as for the intellect.
- (b) The materials should provide occasions for the students to interact with one another.
- (c) The materials should allow students to draw on present realities as well as on their distant future goals.
- (d) The materials should provide for the students to make self-committing choices in the areas covered by (a)-(c) above.

The first criterion echoes the concern for the feelings and attitudes which is typical of humanistic education and one might add here that the primary concern should be less with sentimentality (and unfortunately some language-learning and language-using activities influenced by humanistic education do tend to give rise to sentimentality) than with volition. When given the opportunity to talk about their feelings and attitudes, students tend to *want* to communicate because they can convey things which are important to them and which are of immediate relevance to their present lives (Stevick's third criterion). In order for this to happen, interaction obviously must be encouraged, as has already been appreciated by mainstream TEFL thinking.

### 1.4 Realism

The concept of self-committing choices (Stevick's fourth criterion) means ensuring that the interaction in the classroom is as realistic as possible or, better, real in the full sense of the word, because the students are using English to say what they actually think and feel and so are using language realistically.

In this world of reality we spend a good deal of time talking about ourselves and about other people whom we know or know about. We do not normally discuss at length imaginary characters taken from a coursebook lacking literary merit (although it must be admitted that characters in television soap operas may come in for a fair amount of discussion because of the realism with which they are portrayed!). It follows that a major means of encouraging personal involvement and commitment is a fairly simple one: get the students to talk about themselves and other real people and to discuss real topics that are of immediate interest. It may seem obvious, but few coursebooks do it to any extent. Far commoner is the proliferation of cardboard characters, usually from bland middle-class families, whom the learners are supposed to talk about and

at times impersonate. This, then, is a very important feature to look for in any general coursebook, and if it is lacking you should consider adapting the material to make it more directly relevant to the learners (see Chapter 9 for suggestions).

A further quotation from Stevick (1980, p.204) sums up some of these considerations:

Whole learner materials . . .

- 1 would be written in a style that had some currency outside language textbooks
- 2 would convey some emotion
- 3 would be less bland in their content.

## 2. Social and cultural factors

### 2.1 Geographical setting

Many coursebooks have a readily definable cultural content which is evident in the subject matter of the course and the situations used to present and practice language items. Geographically, the setting is likely to be Britain or the United States, depending upon where the book is published and the market for which it is intended. Courses may also, however, have a non-English speaking country as their setting, and this is commonly the case in countries where English has the role of a second language. There is nothing strange or unreal in depicting two Indians or Nigerians using English to communicate with each other.

### 2.2 Age range and class

Other variables affecting the cultural content of a course include age, social class and occupation catered for. Because most learners of English tend to be secondary school pupils and young adults, the age range depicted and catered for in many courses is that of the late teens and twenties. Examples of this range from *Success with English* (Broughton, 1969) to the *Strategies* series (Abbs *et al*, 1975). The characters appearing in such courses tend to be middle class people living in or near London and having interesting jobs such as that of a journalist or an art-dealer.

### 2.3 Advantages of culture-specific coursebooks

The advantages of a specific cultural setting is that it provides a range of clearly identifiable situations for the presentation and subsequent practice of language items and so gives the course writer the opportunity to make his material meaningful through being contextualised. It also lends itself to the creation of recognisable characters who appear regularly throughout the course, giving a degree of continuity to the material and providing a sense of security for the student, who may well identify with one or more of them. Some of the characters may well feature in a serial story in the coursebook, providing the learner with added motivation to work through the course to the end.

### 2.4 Limitation of culture-specific coursebooks

A limitation of the culture-specific coursebook is that it will only be of relevance to students who understand the cultural background in which it is set. European

learners, for example, would readily comprehend most cultural settings in Britain or the U.S.A., but the same cannot be said of learners in Iraq, Thailand, the Sudan or China, where cultural norms are vastly different. Indeed in these situations a strong portrayal of British life might well prove to be an impediment rather than a help to the learner. Unless the student is ultimately going to visit Britain or the U.S.A., the task of understanding and relating to the range of social situations portrayed in a culture-specific coursebook will be too great for any likely benefit accruing to justify it. The time would be better spent learning the language rather than the structuring of the social world in which the learner is never likely to find himself. The vast success of *First Things First* (Alexander, 1967) is no doubt in part due to its relative lack of culture specificity and the transparency of the situations in which language items are presented, making the book readily acceptable in almost any country in the world.

## 2.5 Teaching cultural background with the language

It follows from what I have written above that students who are intending to visit an English-speaking country for any length of time will need to be able to understand the social scene, and use English appropriately. A coursebook for this category of student should make clear and explicit links between social situations and language and should teach varieties of English which are appropriate to each particular situation.

There is a rather special situation in many European countries and also Japan, where, in the school system, the learning of English has as one of its main aims the gaining of insight into the 'civilisation' or 'life and institutions' of the English-speaking countries, again primarily Britain and the U.S.A. Here language learning is viewed in a broader context and is seen as a vehicle for understanding across national and cultural boundaries. Much of the content of coursebooks designed for such systems has the dual purpose of presenting language and conveying cultural information. The word *culture* here is being used in a general sense and does not solely refer to literature, music, painting, etc. but embraces all aspects of the pattern of life, the values, the problems and the achievements of a national grouping.

Points to consider when evaluating this kind of teaching material include the extent to which the overall picture given is representative of reality, whether the material is up-to-date and presents the contemporary scene rather than giving a historical perspective of life say twenty years ago, and whether there is any obvious bias for political or other reasons.

A danger in teaching language and cultural background together is the temptation to use at an early stage authentic (usually literary) texts which are far too advanced and lead the learner into a plodding process of literal translation. Even worse is the use of texts which no longer reflect current English usage (e.g. extracts from Dickens) and therefore cannot be said to provide the learners with a useful model of the language.

## 2.6 English as a second language

A learning situation very different from the culture-orientated approach outlined above is where English has the role of a *lingua franca* or a second language and is used for communication between groups of people who each have their own native language. People in many African and Asian countries use English in this way; Nigeria and India are good examples.

Course materials for use in this kind of situation will be very firmly rooted in the

culture and traditions of the country where the teaching is to take place. English can be presented realistically and naturally in its role as a second language in use for a variety of purposes within the learners' own country. This state of affairs has the advantage that the learners can see the direct relevance of English to their daily lives and their future prospects, with all that this entails in terms of positive motivation.

## 2.7 Anthropological aspects of language

In conclusion it should be mentioned that any language-learning programme has a cultural content if we take culture in its anthropological sense. The vocabulary of English divides up reality in a particular way, and this is the way that English speakers see the world. English speakers have difficulty in using the French adjectives *grand* and *gros* because they do not correspond exactly in their range of meaning to the English adjectives *tall*, *big*, and *fat*. Similarly English distinguishes between honeydew melons and water melons, which are semantically related in that they are both thought of as being melons. However French, Turkish and some other languages spoken in the Mediterranean area have two completely different words for the two fruits (French: *melon* and *pastèque*; Turkish: *kavun* and *karpuz*) and they are commonly considered to be different fruits, not different kinds of the same fruit.

The learner of English not only has to learn the forms of English but also the conceptual system of English and this includes not only vocabulary but also, for example, the verb system and the way in which time relations are perceived. Some foreign learners have difficulty with the use of the present perfect in English because their conception of time relations is that of their own language, and they have to learn not only the form of the present perfect but also what it means and how it is used. They are learning an aspect of the culture of English-speakers because they are learning how an English-speaker perceives reality and categorises it.

## Summary

Motivation is a major factor in language-learning success. We should look for material that has variety and pace, is of genuine interest to the learners and contains learning activities that will appeal to them. Activities which encourage personal involvement tend to increase motivation. The cultural standpoint of the course material is also important and should match as far as possible the objectives of the learner.

## Exercises and activities

- (a) Is the subject matter of your coursebook genuinely interesting? (See question 7.2 in Chapter 10.) If YES, list the topics which you and your students find most interesting. If NO, what topics do you think your students would be interested in?

What sources can you think of for supplementary reading and/or listening material on interesting subjects?

- (b) What is the cultural background of your coursebook? Do you feel that it is appropriate for your students? What suggestions could you make for improvements? (See 7.8 and 7.9 in Chapter 10.)

## 8 Overall Evaluation

Our consideration of criteria for materials evaluation has taken us through many areas of interest to the language teacher and has brought us into contact, however briefly, with several disciplines. I suggested earlier that the process of evaluation could not be a purely mechanical one and that professional judgement was involved at every stage. By examining teaching materials from a number of different perspectives and establishing explicit criteria for evaluation, we may hope to provide a basis for informed, professional judgement and decision making in this crucial area.

This judgement comes into play particularly in using the checklist in Chapter 10 and the individual user now has to make his own decisions. The points listed below (1 to 9) are suggestions which will help the user to arrive at an overall picture of a particular book if he is evaluating it in a general way without reference to one particular class or group of students, which is why numbers 6 and 7 ask which learning situations the book is suitable for and which situations it is unsuitable for.

- 1 Briefly state the objectives of the material.
- 2 To what extent is it successful in achieving these objectives?
- 3 Note particular strengths.
- 4 Note particular weaknesses.
- 5 Are there any notable omissions?
- 6 For what type of learning situations is the material suitable?
- 7 For what type of learning situations is the material unsuitable?
- 8 Comparisons with any other material evaluated.
- 9 General conclusion.

If you are evaluating material for a particular class in a particular situation you will probably have drawn up a list of the objectives which you wish to achieve with your class and you will then be in a position to match your teaching objectives against the potentialities of the material. Too great a discrepancy should send you searching for material elsewhere, but do not expect a perfect fit. Coursebooks are produced for a general market and for as large a market as possible. No coursebook is likely to be *ideally* suited to your class at its particular stage of development unless you are really lucky. So the aim should be to find the coursebook that most nearly meets your requirements and then you should be prepared to adapt the material to meet your special needs. Some ideas are given in the next chapter on how to adapt material in coursebooks so as to get a better match between materials and objectives.

### Exercises and activities

- (a) With reference to the coursebook you use, note down its good points and its bad points. On balance do you think that its good points outweigh its bad points or vice versa?
- (b) Make a list of the features that are lacking in most present-day courses and that you would like to find in an ideal course to be published in the future. Discuss your ideas with others and build up a composite list. How many of the features in the composite list do you think could realistically be incorporated into a course?