

Overcoming Motivation Problems in a Mixed-ability Classroom

C.J. Clugston

Corresponding author email id: cjclugston@yahoo.com

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Abstract — This research is aimed at improving language teaching methods in the English for Specific Purposes (ESP) area. The objective of this research was to evaluate the effectiveness of a Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) lesson plan for use in a Legal English class. The TBLT lesson plan was analyzed using the action research method. The action research method here is focused on improving the practice of language instruction. The implications of this study can be applied to curriculum development, particularly in the area of ESP-type courses.

Keywords — English as a Second Language (ESL), English for a Specific Purpose (ESP), Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT), Legal English

I. INTRODUCTION

The integration of language acquisition with purpose related content has been an increasing trend in English as a Second Language (ESL) instruction since the early 1980s (Met 1999). Following this trend, the university where I am employed is a strong proponent of the English for a Specific Purpose (ESP) approach to language acquisition. As a result, I find myself teaching, for the first time, a course that is now going to be a regular part of my course load – Legal English. The course is offered exclusively to those students majoring in law and is designed to meet the specific English needs of a lawyer. Although enhanced learner motivation is normally considered one of the natural benefits of this type of tailored approach as used by ESP courses (Fiorito 2009), I have unfortunately found this not to be true for many of the students in my Legal English course.

The motivation problem is primarily the result of the grossly disparate abilities of my students. At the top of the class are those students that have studied abroad in an English speaking country and, excepting some of the common pronunciation and grammar problems, have a near native command of the language. At the other extreme are those students that struggle with anything beyond the basic introductions they have been practicing since childhood. As a result, the planned course content is typically far beyond the abilities of a significant portion of my class. I am thus forced to either slow the course down to the pace of the bottom students or continue to talk over them. I have generally been forced to choose the latter, to the detriment of those students' motivation.

In this paper I will describe specific observations of this motivation problem in the classroom, explain what the possible causes of the problem might be, and review a task-based, group oriented lesson plan that was used to address the problem.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

With the increased focus on ESP in language training, many researchers have found that student motivation and interest has increased. For Example, Basturkment (2006) has discussed the effectiveness of ESP-type English training. This effectiveness results from the structure acquired by studying the language as it relates to a specific purpose: either the academic or workplace environments of the students. Hutchinson and Waters (1994) similarly divide ESP into these two categories of academia and the workplace. They further explain that motivation is increased because ESP instruction focuses on particular questions, such as, what topic areas will be covered, what the student needs to learn, and what aspects of language will be needed.

Motivation is one of the most important factors in language acquisition (Dornyei 1998), and is also one of the areas where a teacher can have the most impact. Dornyei has proposed a three level framework for evaluating and stimulating learner motivation – the *Language Level*, the *Learner Level*, and the *Learning Situation Level*. The *Language Level* focuses on the social environment in which the language instruction occurs. The “ethnolinguistic, cultural-affective, intellectual, and pragmatic values and attitudes attached to the target language.” (Dornyei 1998:205). The *Learner Level*, instead focuses on the personality traits of the particular student. In particular, the students need for achievement and their self-confidence. Finally, the *Learning Situation Level* concerns the classroom setting itself. The main motivational sources at this level are : teacher-specific motivational components, group-specific motivational components, and course-specific motivational components. A key course-specific motivational component can be the selection of a task that is interesting and relevant to the students and where they have an expectancy of success and can gain satisfaction from its completion.

This task focused method of teaching is appropriately called Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT). TBLT has proven effective in motivating learners. Because it requires participation, this method can directly increase student interest. In addition, in combination with the use of a pre-task phase designed to reduce the cognitive load, TBLT can indirectly create a more relaxed atmosphere and increase student confidence. This is because the pre-task phase allows the learner to focus more on linguistic factors. Using a small-group exercise, in contrast to a full class discussion, can further reduce anxiety and increase confidence. The students should feel more comfortable using English among a small group of self-selected peers (Ellis 2009).

An increasingly popular method of assessing teaching



effectiveness is action research. Anne Burnes (2010) defines action research as research that is done with a goal of improving the action within a social situation. More traditional research is focused on the production of knowledge. Action research, however, is more concerned with improving the practice of the activity studied. In addition to researchers and academics, action research is frequently conducted by teachers, administrators, and other stakeholders in the educational environment. Such classroom based action research comprises the four steps of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting

III. ASPECTS OF THE PLAN

A. Identifying the Problem

Because many of the students in these classes are at a low level, the predictable result for these students has been a serious lack of motivation. Many of these students frequently miss class, and when they do attend, they rarely turn in their homework or participate in classroom discussions. These students come in to the course at a level well below the top students in the class, and their lack of motivation causes them to fall further behind during the semester.

B. Determining the Cause of the Problem

The disparate abilities problem is institutional in nature and beyond the scope of what can be addressed in this paper. Legal English is completely disconnected from the regular English program: there are no prerequisites for the course, and it is not classified as a beginner, intermediate, or advanced course, as most other English classes are. Instead, all entering freshmen in the law college must take the course in their first semester. The result being that law students of all abilities enroll in the course. This is an issue that cannot be controlled for and that is unlikely to change in the near future.

The motivational problem, conversely, is something that can be addressed. As pointed out, the motivation problem stems largely from the students relative lack of ability compared to their peers. Because of this, the students likely see the class as a source of anxiety, lack the confidence necessary to participate, and are ultimately disinterested in the lessons. Analyzing the motivation problem under this framework, it is apparent that at the *Language Level*, the integrative and instrumental motivational subsystems have been ineffective in motivating the students. That is to say, the students inherent disposition towards English (integrative) and the potential pragmatic gains for the students in learning English (instrumental) have proven to be insufficient to motivate them (Dornyei 1998). Thus, any attempt to address the problem will need to focus on the *Learner Level* and the *Learning Situation Level*.

This research will focus on three motivational strategies to deal with this: at the *Learner Level*, creating a relaxed, pleasant atmosphere and increasing linguistic self-confidence, and at the *Learning Situation Level*, making the class more interesting (Dornyei 1998). By incorporating three of Dornyei's ten strategies, and using strategies that focus on two different levels of motivation, interest

amongst most, if not all, of the bottom students in the class should increase.

C. Addressing the Problem

The proposed lesson plan uses Task-Based language

D. Addressing the Problem

The proposed lesson plan uses Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) in a small-group exercise. Thus, the lesson plan incorporates all three of the motivational strategies mentioned above.

Lesson Plan

The lesson plan was based on an urban legend known as "The Microwaved Cat." The reading was taken from the popular website www.snopes.com. The students read the sample urban legend and then wrote a report on a Korean urban legend using the same format as the sample. The sample urban legend was related to a legal topic, but the student urban legend was not required to be because this lesson was focused on the general skill of writing. For this class, the students were divided into groups of three, and each of the three students was assigned primary responsibility for either the pre-, during-, or post-task phase. This ensured that each student was participating in the task.

Pre-task:

- 1) Introduce the task and explain the requirements.
- 2) Read the sample out loud as a class. The student from Group 1 with primary responsibility for the pre-task phase will read paragraph one, the student from Group 2 will read paragraph 2, and so on through each group.
- 3) Discuss each of the different sections in the sample and what purpose they serve.

The pre-task phase is designed to reduce the cognitive load on the learner by providing a model. This allows the student to focus more on linguistic factors (Ellis 1998).

During-task:

- 1) Each student writes down a brief description (one or a few words) of an urban legend they know.
- 2) In their groups, the students discuss and choose one of these legends to report on.
- 3) As a group, the students write a report on the legend following the format of the model. The student in each group with primary responsibility for the during-task phase will write the report using the input of all in the group.

The during-task phase will have a strict time limit in order to encourage fluency (Lee 2000, as cited by Ellis 2009), and also to increase interaction among the members of the group.

Post-task:

- 1) Each group will read its urban legend report to the class.
- 2) The student in each group with primary responsibility for the post-task phase will read the report.

Although being required to read a public report in the post-task phase will increase the communicative stress (Candlin 1987, as cited by Ellis 2009), public speaking is a necessary skill for most students in a Legal English class.

IV. EFFECTIVENESS OF THE PLAN

A. Lesson Objectives

The overall lesson objective was to increase class participation among the bottom students in the class. This objective was to be implemented using three supporting objectives, namely the following motivational strategies: (1) creating a relaxed, pleasant atmosphere; (2) increasing linguistic self-confidence; and, (3) making the class more interesting. These objectives target two of the three levels of learner motivation, both the *Learner Level* and the *Learning Situation Level* (Dornyei 1998). The lesson plan was designed to create a relaxed atmosphere and increase self-confidence by both using a pre-task phase to reduce cognitive load and by using a small group exercise as the task. And the lesson plan was designed to make the class more interesting by utilizing a TBLT structure (Ellis 2009).

B. Critical Analysis

The lesson plan was implemented in a twenty-three student Legal English course at Keimyung University. All were undergraduate level students, with a mixture of law and police science majors enrolled. The course analysis will be described sequentially below.

Pre-Task

The students were first allowed to self-select into groups of three. This turned out to be a potential problem, as the bottom students all tended to group together. However, I wanted to see how these students would interact in a group setting and also how they would divide the task requirements of reading, writing, and speaking, so I left the groups as they were.

Once the groups were organized, the students read through the model urban legend. The idea of an 'urban legend' was then discussed and the assignment was explained. The reading portion went fine and the discussion after seemed more involved than usual. There was definitely an increase in student interest from this TBLT lesson plan that was noticeable even during the pre-task.

Task

During the task phase, all members of the groups were actively participating. It seems that having each participant choose his/her own urban legend, and then having the students lobby for their urban legend to be selected as the group project, created a high level of interest. I did, however, notice a problem during this phase. The students had a tendency to speak in Korean. I had to constantly monitor the conversations to keep them using English for this portion of the lesson. This problem was especially acute with the bottom students in the class. In fact, I even noticed that one of these groups was writing the initial draft in Korean and then trying to translate into English. This was a disappointing outcome, because one of the objectives of the lesson was to increase linguistic self-confidence. Even in small groups, many students were still reluctant to use English.

Post-Task

The post-task phase consisted of each group reading their respective urban legend reports to the class. I was pleasantly surprised to see that all of the students were paying attention to each presentation.

V. CONCLUSION

The lesson plan was generally successful. It met the overall objective of increasing class participation to a satisfactory level. In part, it achieved this through simple brute force: the three-person-group, three-task-structure forced participation by requiring each student to handle one of the tasks, no matter how reluctant they are to normally participate. It also met this objective by satisfying the sub-objectives of creating a relaxed atmosphere and making the class more interesting. Indeed, student interest seemed to be an overwhelmingly successful aspect of the lesson plan. However, the lesson plan did not appear to increase linguistic self-confidence, at least among the target students. Thus, a suggestion for further research would be a focus on increasing linguistic self-confidence.

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AUTHOR'S PROFILE

B.S. Genetics, UC Davis

M.S. Culture Technology, KAIST

J.D. University of California – King Hall School of Law

The author is a law professor at Keimyung University in Daegu, Korea. Prior to entering academia, he worked as a lawyer in the United States. His research interests include intellectual property law and educational pedagogy.