Motivational Interviewing: An Effective Tool for Teachers of Second and Foreign Language

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Introduction

Motivation in learning is a collective cognitive activity that focuses on the initiation and maintenance of learning (Pintrich & Schunk, 1996). Second language (L2) motivation has been a subject of study in the past few decades. Studies show that motivation to learn a second language overrides the aptitude factor and thereby makes up for the variability in the cognitive and environmental factors (Gardner & Lambert, 1972). Until 1990, social psychological approach dominated the picture of second language learning with inspiration from Robert Gardner, Wallace Lambert, Richard Clement and their associates. However, the approach to understanding motivation in second and foreign language learning has widened post 1990 with the focus on understanding the educational implications of L2 motivational research. Despite that, motivation in classrooms has not got much scholarly attention and that has forced the teachers to rely on unsystematic methods. According to Dornyei (1998), the amount of research devoted to motivating learners has been meager compared to the total research on L2 motivation.

The current paper discusses the various approaches in motivation to learn a second and foreign language, the technique of motivational interviewing and its implications in modern day classrooms.

Motivation in Second and Foreign Language Learning

The conceptualization of motivation in second and foreign language learning depends on the lines along which it is focused. The social psychological approach of Robert Gardner describes three components, namely motivational intensity; the desire to learn the language; and the attitude towards the act of learning the language. The correlation between attitude and behaviour is directly proportional to the correspondence between the attitudinal and correspondence targets (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1977). Tremblay and Gardner (1995) extended this model by incorporating elements from expectancy value and goal theories.

The linguistic self-confidence concept of Richard Clément posits that the role of self-confidence is significant in foreign language learning. According to the self-determination theory, autonomous learning is a significant contributor to motivation. As per this theory, learners attribute success or failure to their own efforts and strategies rather than to external factors. Studies also show that intrinsic motivation is supported by democratic teaching style (Dickinson, 1995, pp. 173-174).

A study of Hungarian EFL learners revealed a tripartite motivation construct, namely, integratedness, linguistic self-confidence, and the appraisal of the classroom environment (Clément, Dörnyei, and Noels, 1994). Further studies classified the various components of the framework under the following dimensions:

language level, learner level and the learning situation level (Dörnyei, 1994). Williams and Burden developed a similar framework of motivational factors in 1997. However, both frameworks lack directional relationships between the various concepts listed in the framework. Recent studies concentrate on neurobiological models of language acquisition through sustained deep learning based on stimulus appraisal process (Schumann, 1998).

Motivational Interviewing

Motivational interviewing is a client-centred technique of counseling used to explore and resolve ambivalence through a collaborative decision-making approach (Rollnick & Miller, 1995). This technique is grounded in a trans-theoretical model of change according to which behaviour change evolves through six stages, namely, pre-contemplation, contemplation, preparation, action, maintenance, and termination (Prochaska & Velicer, 1997).

Based on these concepts of motivation in second and foreign language learning and the novel technique of motivational interviewing, we attempted to develop a strategy to incorporate the technique of motivational interviewing in language classrooms using the trans-theoretical model of change. The following sections outline the methods used to develop the motivational interviewing strategy.

Methods

From July 2014 to December 2014, the technique of motivational interviewing was developed and pilot tested in the Spanish language classroom of a private institute in Chennai, India. There were 31 participants (14 males; 17 females) registered for Level 1 Spanish. Both group and individual interviewing techniques were used in this class. The technique was used thrice during the 100-hour class (baseline, midline and end lines). First, individual interviews were conducted to assess the importance given by the student to learning Spanish and their motivation for learning it. Mid way through the course, group motivational interviewing was done as an activity of 45 minutes in English. After the final exam, individual interviewing was done to assess the motivation level of the students. The assessment was based on two criteria: the desire to continue to the next level and the attrition rate of the students. Students were personally interviewed before, during and after the classroom. Field notes were taken and analysed separately.

Results

The results indicated high motivation levels among students to continue to their next level and the attrition rate was less than 5 per cent. The technique used in the testing is explained as following with examples.

1) Asking permission

The teacher communicates respect for the students by asking for their permission before questioning them and taking their verbal consent. The teacher as a facilitator does not focus on lecture or advice.

Example:

Do you mind if we discuss your reasons for studying Spanish? [Not all students have the same motivation to learn a language. Understanding the differences helps in customizing activities and exercises in class.]

2) Eliciting intrinsic motivation

Every student comes to the language classroom because of some intrinsic motivation. In successful motivational interviewing, the teacher focuses on eliciting this intrinsic motivation through effective conversations.

Examples:

What do you think you will be able to achieve through this course?

How do you think that learning Spanish will help you in future?

Can you think of any three things that would be beneficial to you as a result of learning Spanish?

Where do you see yourself in five years after learning Spanish?

Do you see any harm in learning Spanish?

3) Exploring the importance

The next step involves understanding the importance of learning the second language from the perspective of the learner. This can be used to understand how they prioritize learning the language and to assess if their priority has changed over a period of time.

How important is Spanish to you? Can you rate it in the following scale?

Very important

Important

Somewhat important

Not at all important

4) Asking open-ended questions

Asking open-ended questions engages the learner in a deeper conversation and also gives the teacher time for reflective listening. Storytelling patterns help in understanding the learner better and in building empathy in contrast to closed or dead-ended questions that make the learner feel as though they are being interrogated.

Example:

What was your previous language learning experience in school or college or anywhere?

5) Reflective listening

The teacher employs the technique of reflective listening wherein the teacher paraphrases what the learner states and does not state her/his own ideas or opinions. This builds empathy and allows more room for building rapport with the students.

Examples:

It seems like you were scared of learning languages.

It sounds like you want to create an alternate career by learning Spanish.

6) Normalizing

The strategy of normalizing is used to make the learner understand that many others also face certain language learning difficulties.

Example:

I understand that you are struggling to learn languages because of a low memory capacity. But this is not unusual. Lot of students face this issue.

7) Decisional balancing

This is an effective exercise where the students discuss their reasons for learning this language, its advantages and disadvantages, and their goals for the language course. Then they write down the deficiencies in their current learning behaviour in terms of reaching the goal. They also discuss how they can bridge this gap through various strategies. The students are the main participants of this activity where the teacher is only a facilitator. An approach called Columboesque approach is used to discuss the discrepancies without blaming or judging. This can be used anytime during the course.

Example:

Help me understand this, you want to work on learning the language at least for two hours a day but are not able to do it. What do you think can be done?

8) Statements supporting self-efficacy

Some of the students have low self-confidence in learning a language. Statements supporting self-efficacy help the student to learn better.

Example:

I can see that your Spanish has improved.

You seem to have understood this concept better.

Fifty hours back, you did not know much about Spanish, but now you seem to have learnt a lot of words.

9) Affirmations

The teacher makes positive affirmations in response to what the learner says, avoiding statements that exaggerate the response.

Example:

Your commitment to learning this language is good and it is nice to know that you spend one hour everyday learning Spanish.

10) Advice/feedback

The teacher frequently provides feedback to the student, which helps them to be on a continuous improvement path.

Discussion

Our observation of the students after using this technique of motivational interviewing showed that it helped the students make effective decisions related to language learning, hence leading to a purpose-driven learning system. Initial success in learning the language reinforced their intrinsic motivation and self-confidence, which proves the linguistic self-confidence concept of Richard Clément. The educational implications in the language learning classrooms are many and they can be used during various periods of time during the entire course. This technique can be used to motivate students of any language classroom irrespective of age, sex or other socio-cultural factors. Limitations of this study however are that this technique was developed with a very small sample size. A larger sample size would have yielded a wider perspective on the implications of this technique.

Conclusion

Motivational interviewing is effective in eliciting the intrinsic motivation of students to learn a language. However, further studies are required to understand its cross-cultural implications.

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