Learning to communicate in another language takes a long time. It is one of the most challenging tasks your students are likely to undertake, and they can easily become discouraged and bored with it. This section presents techniques that language teachers can use to keep their students interested and motivated by helping them understand the language acquisition process, connect language learning with their larger educational and life goals, and succeed as language learners.

A self-evaluation worksheet, attached at the end of this document, allows instructors to assess their current and potential motivation techniques. A supervisor observation worksheet enables supervisors to support instructors' development of such techniques.

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The material in this section is based on "Research and language learning: A tour of the horizon" by Ken Sheppard and "Teaching learning strategies to language students" by Anna Uhl Chamot from Modules for the Professional Preparation of Teaching Assistants in Foreign Languages (Grace Stovall Burkart, Ed.; Washington, DC: Center for Applied Linguistics, 1998).

Understanding Language Acquisition

To become engaged learners, students need to understand that learning a language is not the same as learning about a language. When students think of the language as a school subject like any other, they may learn a great deal about its vocabulary, grammar, and sentence and discourse structure, but the language will not become a true medium of communication for them and won't engage them very deeply. Students need to understand that learning a language means becoming able to use it to comprehend, communicate, and think—as they do in their first language.

Students also need to recognize that language learning takes place in stages. Interpretive skills (listening, reading) develop much more quickly than expressive skills (speaking, writing), and the ability that students covet most—the ability to speak the second language fluently—requires the longest period of growth.

All language learners have to work through a sequence of "approximate" versions called interlanguages (ILs), each of which represents a level of understanding of the target language. Understanding the features of ILs can help teachers and learners understand and monitor the language learning process.

Uniqueness: ILs vary significantly from learner to learner in the early stages of language learning. Learners impose rules of their own on the oral and written input they receive. Each learner does this differently, combining emerging understanding of the rules of the new language with ideas derived from the first language and other information that comes from their individual situations and backgrounds.

Systematicity: As learners begin to develop proficiency in a language, they make errors in systematic ways. For example, once students learn the inflections for a single class of verbs, they may apply them to all classes indiscriminately. These errors are based on systematic assumptions, or false rules, about the language. When students become aware of this aspect of their language skill development, they often appreciate and even ask for overt error correction from the instructor.

Fossilization: Some false rules become more firmly imprinted on the IL than others and are harder for learners to overcome. Fossilization results when these false rules become permanent features of a learner's use of the language.

Convergence: As learners' rules come to approximate more closely those of the language they are learning, convergence sets in. This means that learners who come from different native language backgrounds make similar assumptions and formulate similar hypotheses about the rules of the new language, and therefore make similar errors.

Instructors can help students understand the process of language skill development in several ways.

(a) Focus on interlanguage as a natural part of language learning; remind them that they learned their first language this way.
(b) Point out that the systematic nature of interlanguage can help students understand why they make errors. They can often predict when they will make errors and what types of errors they will make.
(c) Keep the overall focus of the classroom on communication, not error correction. Use overt correction only in structured output activities. (See Planning a Lesson for more on structured output.)
(d) Teach students that mistakes are learning opportunities. When their errors interfere with their ability to communicate, they must develop strategies for handling the misunderstanding that results.

If you maintain the attitude that mistakes are a natural part of learning, you will create a supportive environment where students are willing to try to use the language even though their mastery of forms is imperfect.

Promoting Engagement in Language Learning

Language teachers promote or discourage students' engagement by the ways they define successful language learners. When the successful language learner is one who can pass tests and make good grades, learning about the language is all that is required and success is defined by mastery of rules and forms. When the successful language learner is one who has the ability to use the language to accomplish communication goals, success is defined as making the language one's own.

To promote engagement in language learning:

- Encourage students to use the language spontaneously to communicate ideas, feelings, and opinions
- Identify informal out-of-class language learning experiences
- Ask students to evaluate their progress in terms of increases in their functional proficiency

Students' motivation for learning a language increases when they see connections between what they do in the classroom and what they hope to do with the language in the future. Their attention increases when classroom activities are relevant to their other interests.

To make these connections, begin by having students list the ways they may use the language in future. Have them include both the ways they plan to use it and other ways that might arise. Ask them to be as specific as possible. For each way of using language, ask them to list specific communication tasks that they will need to be able to do. Use these purposes and tasks as the basis for task-oriented classroom communication activities.

Some lower level students will respond that they don't plan to use the language—that they are taking the course to fulfill a university language requirement. Encourage these students to develop an imaginary scenario for themselves in which they have some reason for using the language. In doing this, some students may think of ways in which they really might use it, and others will come to understand that purpose is an integral part of language learning.

Sample Ways of Using a Language

- When traveling in a country where it is spoken
  Tasks: ask for directions (and understand responses), purchase tickets and book hotel rooms, read signs and informational materials
- To study at a university in a country where it is spoken
  Tasks: understand lectures, take notes, read academic materials, talk with other students (social and academic talk)
- To become knowledgeable about the history and culture of a country where it is spoken
  Tasks: read about history and culture, understand plays, movies, and other performances, interview people from the country
- To provide legal assistance to native speakers who are immigrants to this country

Tasks: gather personal statistical information, explain legal requirements, explain social and cultural expectations, describe procedures, understand and answer questions.

Another way of making language instruction relevant and interesting to students is to find out what topics they are studying and draw materials for reading and discussion from those fields. However, remember that reading and discussion do not always have to be about serious issues or academic topics. Students enjoy talking about movies and television programs, vacation plans, famous people, and other popular culture topics.

Finally, don't be afraid to drop a topic if students' interest begins to fade. Ask them to suggest alternatives. When students know that they have some control over what they do in the language classroom, they take ownership as engaged learners.

Achieving Success with Learning Strategies

Students learning a language have two kinds of knowledge working for them:
- Their knowledge of their first language
- Their awareness of learning strategies, the mechanisms they use, consciously or unconsciously, to manage the absorption of new material

Students differ as language learners in part because of differences in ability, motivation, or effort, but a major difference lies in their knowledge about and skill in using "how to learn" techniques, that is, learning strategies. Classroom research demonstrates the role of learning strategies in effective language learning:

- Good learners are able to identify the best strategy for a specific task; poor learners have difficulty choosing the best strategy for a specific task
- Good learners are flexible in their approach and adopt a different strategy if the first one doesn't work; poor learners have a limited variety of strategies in their repertoires and stay with the first strategy they have chosen even when it doesn't work
- Good learners have confidence in their learning ability; poor learners lack confidence in their learning ability
- Good learners expect to succeed, fulfill their expectation, and become more motivated; poor learners: expect to do poorly, fulfill their expectation, and lose motivation

Learning strategies instruction shows students that their success or lack of it in the language classroom is due to the way they go about learning rather than to forces beyond their control. Most students can learn how to use strategies more effectively; when they do so, they become more self reliant and better able to learn independently. They begin to take more responsibility for their own learning, and their motivation increases because they have increased confidence in their learning ability and specific techniques for successful language learning.

Instructors can tap into students' knowledge about how languages work and how learning happens—their metacognition—to help them direct and monitor the language learning process in two ways:

- By encouraging them to recognize their own thinking processes, developing self-knowledge that leads to self-regulation: planning how to proceed with a learning task, monitoring one's own performance on an ongoing basis, and evaluating learning and self as learner upon task completion. Students with greater metacognitive awareness understand the similarity between the current learning task and previous ones, know the strategies required for successful learning, and anticipate success as a result of knowing how to learn.
- By describing specific learning strategies, demonstrating their application to designated learning tasks, and having students practice using them. In order to continue to be successful with learning tasks, students need to be aware of the strategies that led to their success and recognize the value of using them again. By devoting class time to learning strategies, teachers reiterate their importance and value.
- Build on strategies students already use by finding out their current strategies and making students aware of the range of strategies used by their classmates
- Integrate strategy instruction with regular lessons, rather than teaching the strategies separately from language learning activities
- Be explicit: name the strategy, tell students why and how it will help them, and demonstrate its use
- Provide choice by letting students decide which strategies work best for them
- Guide students in transferring a familiar strategy to new problems
- Plan continuous instruction in language learning strategies throughout the course
- Use the target language as much as possible for strategies instruction

To teach language learning strategies effectively, instructors should do several things:
(See Planning a Lesson for information on integrating strategy instruction into a language lesson.)

Learning Strategies for Language Learners

Learning strategies researchers have generated many lists of strategies reported by students. Those listed here are ones that teachers can teach and that students have found useful in learning a language.

METACOGNITIVE STRATEGIES	
STRATEGY	**DESCRIPTION**
Organize / Plan	- Set goals - Plan how to accomplish the task - Plan the task or content sequence
Manage Your Own Learning	- Determine how you learn best - Arrange conditions that help you learn - Seek opportunities for practice - Focus your attention on the task
Monitor	While working on a task: - Check your progress on the task. - Check your comprehension as you use thelanguage. Are you understanding? - Check your production as you use the language.Are you making sense?
Evaluate	After completing a task: - Assess how well you have accomplished thelearning task. - Assess how well you have applied the strategies. - Decide how effective the strategies were in helpingyou accomplish the task.

TASK-BASED STRATEGIES	
STRATEGY	**DESCRIPTION**
USE WHAT YOU KNOW	
Use Background Knowledge	- Think about and use what you already know tohelp you do the task. - Make associations.
Make Inferences	- Use context and what you know to figure outmeaning. - Read and listen between the lines.
Make Predictions	- Anticipate information to come. - Make logical guesses about what will happen.
Personalize	Relate new concepts to your own life, that is, toyour experiences, knowledge, beliefs, and feelings.
Transfer / Use Cognates	- Apply your linguistic knowledge of otherlanguages (including your native language) to thetarget language. - Recognize cognates.
Substitute / Paraphrase	• Think of a similar word or descriptive phrase forwords you do not know in the target language.
USE YOUR IMAGINATION	
Use Imagery	Use or create an image to understand and/orrepresent information.
Use Real Objects / Role Play	- Act out and/or imagine yourself in different rolesin the target language. - Manipulate real objects as you use the targetlanguage.
USE YOUR ORGANIZATIONAL SKILLS	
Find/Apply Patterns	- Apply a rule. - Make a rule. - Sound out and apply letter/sound rules.
Group/Classify	Relate or categorize words or ideas according toattributes.
Use Graphic Organizers /Take Notes	- Use or create visual representations (such as Venndiagrams, time lines, and charts) of importantrelationships between concepts. - Write down important words and ideas.
Summarize	Create a mental, oral, or written summary ofinformation.
Use Selective Attention	Focus on specific information, structures, keywords, phrases, or ideas.

TASK-BASED STRATEGIES	
STRATEGY	DESCRIPTION
USE A VARIETY OF RESOURCES	
Access Information Sources	▪ Use the dictionary, the internet, and otherreference materials. ▪ Seek out and use sources of information. ▪ Follow a model ▪ Ask questions
Cooperate	▪ Work with others to complete tasks, buildconfidence, and give and receive feedback.
Talk Yourself Through It (Self-Talk)	▪ Use your inner resources. Reduce your anxiety byreminding yourself of your progress, the resourcesyou have available, and your goals.

Resources

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Instructor Self-evaluation Worksheet

Use this worksheet to think about how you help learners become motivated and ways you can encourage them to become more engaged in language learning.

1. I define a successful language learner as one who can:

2. Ways I treat students' interlanguages as problems to be corrected:

3. Ways I treat students' interlanguages as steps in a developmental process:

4. My students' goals for learning the language usually are:

5. Ways I ask (or could ask) my students to connect language learning with their goals and interests:

6. Learning strategies I have seen my students use:

7. Learning strategies that could help my students, and ways to introduce them:

8. I have the following concerns or reservations about learning strategy instruction:

Supervisor Observation Worksheet

Use this worksheet when observing a teacher's classroom performance to provide feedback on teaching behaviors. Whenever possible, give specific examples.

1. What is the teacher's definition of a successful language learner? How was that apparent in the class?

2. How did the teacher respond when students' interlanguages became evident?

3. How did the teacher and/or the students connect classroom activities with larger goals and interests?

4. What learning strategies did the instructor teach or model?

5. What learning strategies did students use on their own?

6. How would you characterize students' overall approach to and attitude about language learning?

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