The Art of Learning English: Increasing Motivation Through Activities

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Background

Interest in the culture of the target language (TL) and social interactions with speakers of the TL are indicators of motivation. In Gardner’s Attitude/Motivation test battery (Gardner & Smythe 1981), several items reflect the importance of culture and social interactions with L2 speakers, in this case, French Canadians and French Europeans. The questions deal with interest in the cultural heritage of the L2 as well as interest in having L2 native speaker friends. As these factors indicate students’ motivation, it is no surprise that they are also good predictors of student success. In a study correlating informal interactive contact in Spanish with oral proficiency of L2 learners of Spanish, Yager (1998) found that “more interactive contact relates to more gain,” for all of the learners in his study, especially beginners. Learning about Spanish culture, having conversations with native speakers, and “joining special interest groups or clubs,” all contributed to gains in proficiency, by increasing motivation and providing opportunities to practice. “Enjoyment of speaking and observing Spanish…relate to greater gains in Spanish,” the author suggests. The interaction should not only be informal, but enjoyable and positive. In this study, students were able to spend a semester in the country of the target language, where they could choose from many different activities according to their interest.

Our female students learning English at UGRU have limited options for this type of interaction. While they may encounter English-speaking members of the service industry in their daily lives, the opportunities for informal, social interaction are limited. Study abroad opportunities are limited for cultural reasons. For these same reasons, girls may not be able to or may not want to participate in English-speaking clubs and activities outside the University. Providing many options for socializing in English at the University could have a positive effect on these students.

Marla Shoemaker, a curator at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, had a lot of success through her program for ESL students called ART/ESOL, in which students were introduced to artworks and created their own (Shoemaker 1998). In “Art is a Wonderful Place to Be,” she describes how students were
motivated to communicate in English to their teachers about artworks they saw and made. In addition, the students, who struggled in many other English-medium subjects, “went from being the ones usually left out of things to being the ones whose work was heralded” as they expressed themselves through images with confidence.

Programs like Shoemaker’s intrigue me. I have a degree in fine arts, and a program like this would put both of my main academic interests to use. Moreover, I had heard many experienced UGRU teachers say that the UGRU girls loved drawing, and this could plainly be seen in my classes. With such talented artists in the UAEU student body, I thought we could create a similar environment here on campus, where students could make art and enjoy informal, social interaction, maybe even in English. It could increase motivation or make the most of existing motivation and perhaps entice girls into informal English practice. I discussed the idea with Yassir Semmar, the Academic Services Coordinator of UGRU, and he agreed.

A Meaningful Context

A main objective of the UGRU Art Club was to create a meaningful context for English use. I have noticed in my teaching that the students of UGRU sometimes view English as an abstract subject matter to be learned for an exam, rather than a medium of communication. “The challenge is to hold the students’ attention while encouraging them to learn to express themselves in English.” (Shoemaker 1998)

In Shoemaker’s program, as well as the Art Club, the art would hold interested students’ attention, and English could be the way they would express themselves about an interesting subject matter.

To this end, a typical Art Club meeting would begin with the presentation of a task or technique (usually 10 minutes), which would be followed by around 90 minutes of artwork and informal discussion. Dornyei (2001) stipulates that pedagogic tasks be made attractive by “including novel, intriguing, exotic, humorous… or fantasy elements.” Some of the tasks were cooperative, such as Figure 5, in which students worked together to blow up a photograph. Others explored students’ identity in a fantasy context, such as Anime week, an example of which shows an Arabic character drawn in Japanese Anime style (Figure 2).

Students would never be officially required to speak English, but it would be naturally necessary to communicate with the instructor and to get information to complete the art projects. In this respect, the Art Club was fairly successful. While students did tend talk in Arabic, they often translated to include me in discussions about school, clothes, films, and art outside the classroom.
In addition, conversations about art always included English words, even if they occurred primarily in Arabic. I explicitly taught art terms such as perspective, proportion, portrait, shading, matte, and still life during the lessons. The students seemed to pick this new vocabulary up quickly and were able to use the words much later. Many of the concepts were new, and the students often did not know Arabic words to describe them, so I frequently heard one of these words within an Arabic conversation between two students. Supplies were kept in clearly-labelled containers, so students were able to respond to requests such as, “Why don’t you get out the pastels?” without being explicitly taught the meaning of the word pastels. Other vocabulary came up during the tasks, such as the names of objects in still-lifes.

**Attendance**

Because a major objective of the Art Club was to promote motivation through informal social interaction, it could not have any obligatory aspect. That is, students would never be required to attend and the setting would be informal. Attendance would not be taken, and the club would not satisfy any academic requirement. Keeping it optional was important. This became especially clear when a few students came to the Art Club because their teachers had offered them credit of some kind. These students sat quietly in a corner, put no effort into their art projects, and did not interact with the rest of the club in English or Arabic. While participation in English-language clubs might correlate with motivation to learn English, forced participation does by no means increase motivation.

Given the amount of non-optional activities the students at UAEU are involved in, it comes as no surprise that attendance at the Art Club varied. The first semester, when the club met twice a week, attendance varied from 2 or 3 girls to 12-14 on some occasions. During exams it dwindled. In the fall semester of 2005, my colleague Mike Green and I decided to expand the club and have four two hour meetings per week. Attendance peaked at about 5 during the first few weeks of the semester, and then dropped to 2-3 consistent students for each instructor. This could have been due to the increased stresses of the Ramadan semester, inadequate advertising, or the fact that the art club was no longer novel. In addition, there were more new clubs available to students this semester than I had ever seen in UGRU.

**Effects**

While no measures were taken to document any change in motivation in the participants of the Art Club, I feel that it was successful in a number of ways, despite losing its novelty and, gradually, most of its participants.

First of all, I noticed some gains in individual students. W, an extremely talented artist in Level 2, was reticent to speak English in the beginning of the semester, even to me. As a Level 2 teacher, I recognized that her verbal skills were consistent with her level at the beginning of the semester. However,
after four hours per week of extra English conversation, she became much more confident in her English speaking abilities. After Art Club was officially over for the semester, W came into my office and we spent a couple of hours looking at art from the Renaissance, a period that particularly interested her artistically, but which she could not research by herself due to her conservative background and the abundant nudity in art from that time. While I carefully censored the pictures, we discussed modestly-attired examples. She made observations about the shading and perspective, and I introduced her to the concept of *chiaroscuro*. This was a relatively sophisticated conversation compared to those I had had with my Level 2 students, and I believe it was partially due to the positive interaction W. had in the Art Club.

While attendance decreased dramatically over the two semesters, we were visited quite by quite a few “Art Club alumni”. While they had ceased to attend regularly, these students clearly had positive feelings about the Art Club, and wanted to visit. Also, at the end of the semester, there was an event called the Activities Souk, at which several new students expressed interest in the club and participated in our task, a group painting (Figure 3).

Another possible effect of Art Club was on other teachers. When I began the Art Club, there was only one other UGRU club that I was aware of, the Scrabble Club. No one ever suggested to me that I might use my committee hours thusly, and I had been a bit hesitant to ask. After the club started, and I told other teachers about it, I heard the question, “You can do that for committee work?” several times. This past semester, at least two people I had talked to and encouraged started clubs. The option seemed to be more well-known. There are now several options for students seeking informal, social interaction in English—Drama Club, English Café, English Games, among others.

All things considered, I feel that my objectives were met with Art Club. I will continue to be involved with the club, although I will decrease its hours in future semesters.
REFERENCES


Shoemaker, Marla. 1998. “Art is a wonderful place to be: Museum learners” *Art Education* March 1998