

Motivate Students, Accelerate Learning

by Mari Nakamura

Children, by nature, are active learners. They are full of life and curiosity and learning is at the very core of their existence. (Paul, 2003)

How do your students look when they visit your school for the first time? They almost certainly look full of life and curiosity. They are excited to see their new teacher and friends, and to learn something foreign to them! Their eyes sparkle when they sound out an English word or two successfully, and you go, 'How fortunate I am to have such motivated students in my class!' But as weeks go by, things start to change...The general energy level subsides, with a few children looking out of the window with blank expressions. Now you wonder what has gone wrong: 'Is it me, the activities, the textbook, or the students?'

In this article, I'd like to focus on how to maintain young learners' high motivational levels throughout the year, rather than how to generate the initial motivation. How can we keep our students' motivational level high, and accelerate learning?

What is motivation?

The most practical way to look at motivation is to divide it into three categories: intrinsic value, attainment value and utility value. What does each term mean in the context of English learning?

A: Intrinsic Value—The pure interest in and joy of learning the language.

When students find an activity fun and exciting, they quite naturally put a lot of effort into it. We can see the signs when our students smile, laugh, and work hard in class. It is particularly important to nurture this type of motivation in Japanese students, who do not have the immediate necessity to use English in their daily lives. Some of them come to our classes week after week simply because their parents drop them at the school like little parcels! It is our utmost duty to let them experience the joy of learning English in each lesson.

B: Attainment Value—The value of obtaining achievement.

When our students achieve the goal of a lesson, this experience gives them the strength to explore the world of English further. To make this happen in every lesson, we need to set a clear goal, and divide it into sub-goals which young learners can achieve through fun activities. Take notice of each child's strengths, and praise their effort and progress whenever possible.

They also want to be recognized by their classmates and

parents. For this reason, we need to make the recognition as visible and tangible as possible, for example, by decorating a classroom wall with the students' work and by sending positive notes to their parents when they learn new skills.

C: Utility Value—Rewards such as stickers, sweets, and prizes.

David Paul wrote in his book, *Teaching English to Children in Asia* (2003), 'Rewards tend to encourage children to learn in order to get the rewards, not to achieve internal goals, so rewards may have an adverse effect on motivation'. My experience has taught me that more often than not, rewards like candy shift students' focus away from learning itself.

The best reward for them is the progress they make in learning, and the joy that brings. It doesn't cost a penny—you just need to provide them with a pedagogically sound curriculum with lots of fun and stimulating activities.

Motivating Picture Book Activities

As I mentioned in the previous section, it is vital that we design activities that are enjoyable for young learners if we want them to participate in class actively.

One way of doing this is to use picture books, which can play an important role in motivating young learners. Attractive illustrations grab their attention, easy-to-follow story lines keep their attention level high, and language presented in meaningful contexts helps student retention. Let me introduce you to some picture book activities that have proven to be popular among my students.

Activity 1:

Level and age: Basic level students, ages from 5 to 9.

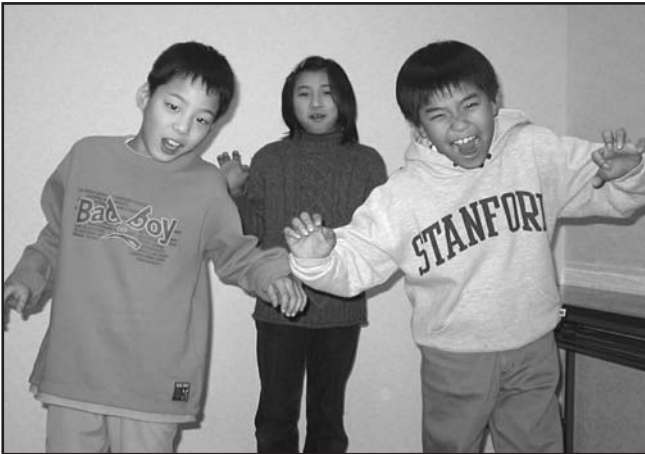
Material: A picture book with simple and repetitive language.

Procedure: After reading the story, teach a miming gesture for each scene. Read the story again, letting students join in with mimes and speech. For a large class, you could divide the class into as many parts as there are characters in the story.

Here is an example taken from *Not now, Bernard* (Mckee, 1990):

'Hello, monster,' he said to the monster. (Students say, 'Hello, monster', waving and smiling.)

'The monster ate Bernard up, every bit.' (Students say, 'Yum!', rubbing their tummies.)



The monster ate Bernard up, every bit. 'Yumm!'

'Then the monster went indoors.' (Students say, 'Thump! Thump! Thump!' swaggering like a monster.)

What are the benefits of this activity?

- Young learners can join in the story at their own level, e.g., only with gestures, thus making the activity motivating for all the students.
- Miming a story together unites the class, creating a safe environment for young learners to explore the world of English.
- The teacher can assess students' listening ability without it being obvious to the students that the teacher is monitoring.

But will this activity work with older students? Probably not. The children whose priority in life is to look cool will not want to say 'Hello!' waving and smiling!

One of the alternative ideas for older children is to have them raise their hands or stand up when they hear a certain part of speech.

Activity 2: Listening for Grammar

Level and age: Advanced level students, ages from 10 to 12.
 Material: A storybook with a narrative style.
 Procedure: Read the story aloud while letting the students raise their hands/stand up when they hear the past tense of verbs, for instance, as in the following example:

The next day Jack opened his eyes and looked outside. What a surprise! In the garden he saw a big green beanstalk. It went up and up and up! (Bradshaw, 2000)

(Students raise hands or stand up quickly when they hear the underlined words)

These activities make the students' participation visible, and let the students show their achievement to their teacher, thus increasing their pride in their achievement.

Motivating Chant Activities

Once our students understand a story, we want them to use the key language items in it. Putting the story into a

catchy chant enables young learners to retell a story in an enjoyable and unthreatening environment.

Activity 3: Dramatizing a Story with a Chant

Level and age: Basic level students, ages from 5 to 8.
 Material: A storybook, and a chant to go with it
 Procedure: In advance, create a simple chant using the vocabulary and sentence patterns presented in the storybook. Add some simple gestures to the chant. In class, after reading the story, go through the chant line by line showing the gestures. Gradually encourage the students to join in.

Here's a chant I wrote based on the Goldilocks story. This dramatization activity is ideal for a performance at an event or a party. Use simple props such as paper masks, an apron, and kitchen utensils to enhance the visual effect.

*Mummy, Daddy and Baby Bear;
 'Let's eat breakfast. Oh, it's hot!'
 Mummy, Daddy and Baby Bear;
 'Oh, it's nice! Let's go for a walk.'
 Goldilocks comes in, and eats breakfast,
 'Mmm. This is good. Yum, yum, yum.'
 Goldilocks is full, and sleeps on a bed.
 'I like this bed! Zzz...'
 Mummy, Daddy and Baby Bear: come back, and say, 'ROAR!'
 Run! Goldilocks! Run!*

Chants are another powerful vehicle for language learning. Repetitive language, upbeat rhythm and movement enable young learners to memorize the language easily. One concern often raised by teachers is that older students tend to be less eager to do chants—particularly with gestures. Some teachers even say that chanting does not have a place in classes for preteens. But wait a minute! Hip-hop is one of the most popular genres of music among teenagers! A strong beat and catchy words have universal appeal. We just need a different approach when using chants with preteens than when teaching younger children.

Here's a chant activity for older children. As you read through the description below, consider why this activity is motivating for older children.

Activity 4: Listening and Remembering

Level and age: Intermediate level students, ages from 9 to 12
 Material: A recorded song or chant which presents vocabulary items in a specific order. Flashcards of the vocabulary items.
 Procedure: Play the song or chant, and have the students listen to it. Put the flashcards in a random order on the board. Have the students put them in the correct order, remembering the song or chant. Play the CD (or tape), and check if they have lined up the cards correctly.

For example, play the ‘Busy Every Day Chant’ from the *Longman Children’s Picture Dictionary* (Krause *et al.*, 2003), and use word cards (the days of the week), and picture cards (after class activities). After hearing the chant, the students line up the cards in order, e.g., Monday—ballet class. Play the CD again, and see if they have lined up the cards correctly. Have the students make sentences according to the arrangement of the cards, e.g., *She has a ballet class on Monday.*

Why is this activity motivating for preteens? Because this activity is task-based, and requires high mental engagement. The goal is not simply to comprehend the meaning or to imitate the teacher’s chanting. It is to listen to the chant, *remember* the order of the lines, and *make sentences* using the cues that they have arranged. Older students need activities which challenge their mental capacity.

Motivating Personalization Activities

Do you like to talk about your life when you get together with friends? Most of us do, and this also applies to children. Young learners feel excited when they successfully express themselves in English, however simple the language may be. One of the keys to keeping your students’ interest in English high is to implement a personalization activity in every lesson.

For example, after the chant activity above, you can let your students draw and write about their busy weekly schedule. Yes! Children nowadays are really busy, and they should have a lot to say about their tight schedules.

Activity 5: Drawing and Writing about a Weekly Schedule

Level and age: Intermediate level students, ages from 9 to 12.

Material: Colored pencils and paper.



We like weekends because we have no classes!

My Weekly Schedule
by Shun

My name's Shun.

On Tuesday I have English class.

On Thursday I have ping-pong club.

On Friday I have Swimming class.

I like Friday because it's before the weekend

Do you know why I like Friday?

Procedure: Children draw and write about their weekly schedules. When the work is completed, they give presentations in turn. Finally, display the work on a classroom wall.

This activity allows children to express themselves and makes their progress visible and tangible. They can show their work to their friends and parents, and have their accomplishment recognized by some of the most important people in their lives.

As much as children like to talk about themselves, they like to know about their friends. They become excited when they find something in common with their friends. (Again, isn't this the same as ourselves?—‘Do you like R&B, too? Great! Why don't we...?’)

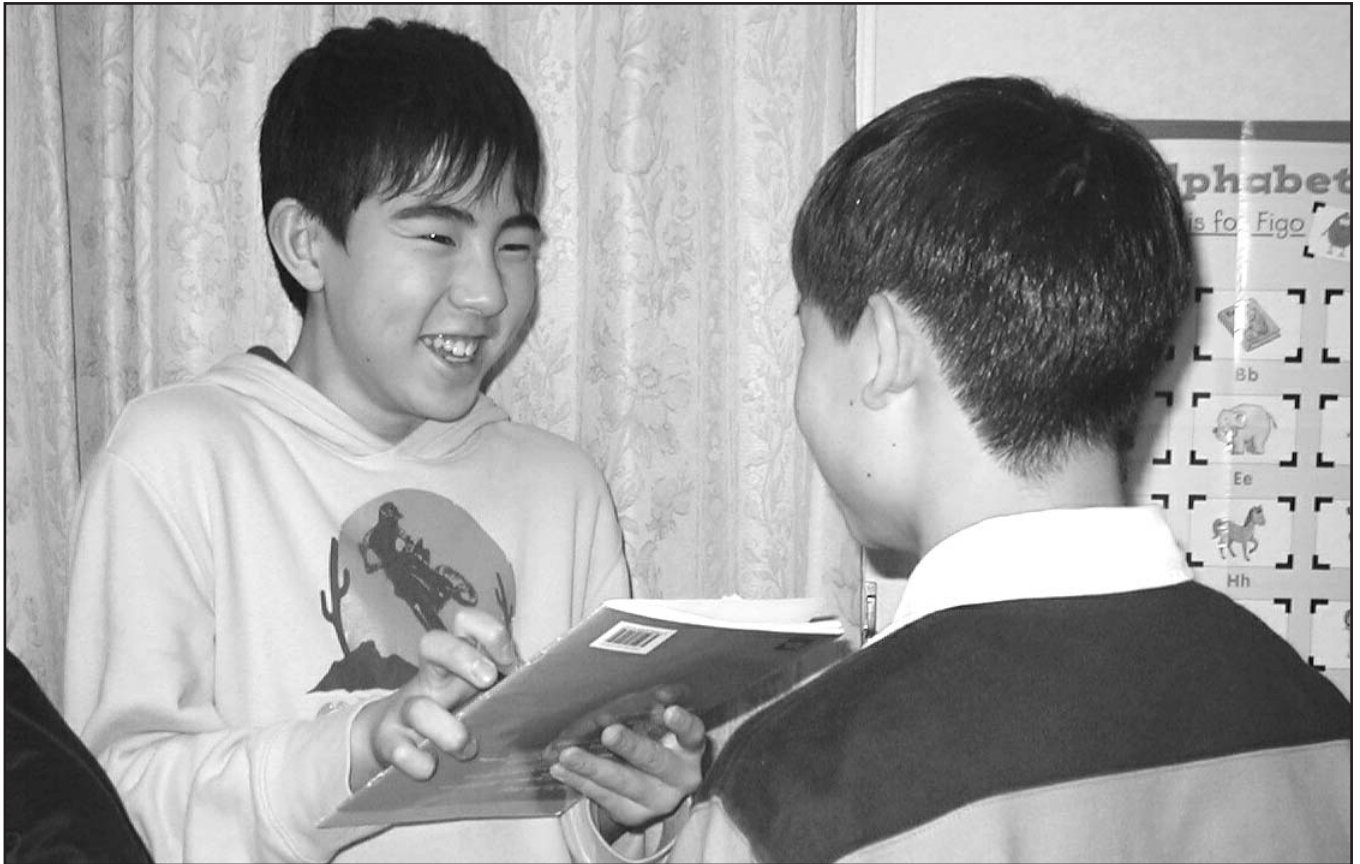
In the activity below, students get up, mingle and find out who has the same plans as themselves.

Activity 6: Interview Activity—Who has the same plans?

Level and age: Advanced level students, ages from 10 to 12.

Material: Phrase Cards: *go see a movie, go on vacation, go shopping, visit some friends, take a test, volunteer*, etc. (one set per student)

Procedure: Each student thinks of his/her plans, and chooses three cards. They write a time expression, e.g., *tomorrow, this weekend, and this summer*, on the cards. They walk around the room with the cards and a pencil, and ask classmates, ‘Are you going to (go shopping) this weekend?’ If a



'Really? We have the same plans!'

friend answers, 'Yes, I am' the student gets the signature of the friend on the card, and goes on to talk to other students. If a friend says, 'No, I'm not' the student goes on to talk to other students.

The joy of this activity is that they are using English for meaningful communication. It is advisable that you do not use a point system because this can make them choose the most common activities for the sake of collecting points! The greater the variety of expressions they use, the more linguistic purposes the activity serves.

After this activity, let them take turns to report back in front of the class. This will let them share the information they have collected with friends, and will give them a sense of achievement. To enhance their writing skills you may also have them write a brief report.

Lesson Planning Just for Your Students

I hope you've found the ideas above fun and educational. But you have your own teaching style, and know your students best! Go ahead and make changes to the activities to design fun tasks relevant to your students' needs.

Here is a Motivating Lesson Plan Check List for your quick reference:

- Does the lesson have a clear goal?
- Is the goal divided into manageable sub-goals?
- Does the lesson consist of various age-appropriate activities?

- Does the lesson promote all four skills in a balanced manner?
- Are the successes and progress made visible and tangible for young learners?
- Is personalization encouraged throughout the lesson?

References

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I would like to thank Carol Harold and Barbara Murray for their input.

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