Mu Fengying

CHINA

Motivating Students BY Modifying Evaluation Methods

A FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNER'S MOTIVATION CAN BE INFLUENCED BY MANY FACTORS: social, psychological, educational, and economical, to name a few. In spite of the complicated situation, teachers can still do a lot to motivate their students by being observant, understanding, informed, and tactful. By reflecting on 20 years of foreign language teaching experience, plus observing my colleagues' and students' behavior, and reading professional literature of foreign language teaching, I came to realize that one of the things that we can do to greatly motivate our students is to modify our evaluation methods.

The prevailing situation

In the Chinese educational tradition with Confucius as a model, a good teacher is viewed as someone who is responsible, stern, knowledgeable, authoritative, and respectable. He usually works conscientiously and sets high demands on his students, and therefore, is very strict with them. This Confucian model has exerted a great influence on foreign language teaching in China. Here are some typical scenes:

1. The teacher is very demanding. Most of the time students cannot live up to his expectations because the expectations simply go up with the students' achievements. What's more, the teacher will not express his satisfaction or appreciation even when he feels it in his heart. A Chinese teacher is simply not used to praising his students.

2. The teacher is responsible. He will correct every student's assignment, working until late at night. Notice the word "correct" has been used instead of "mark" or "assess." The teacher will be careful to point out every single mistake, error, or improper use of the target language and write the correct answer. Looking at all the red marks on the students' work, he might think, "I have done my work thoroughly, seriously, and responsibly."

3. The students are compared with each other. Throughout a course, students are ranked on the basis of their results on endless tests and exams. Some teachers will go to the extreme of informing a student that he now ranks *n*th place in the class, and that he should work harder to move up to a higher ranking on the following exam.

The sad thing is that a teacher's good will and extra effort frequently bring about negative and harmful effects on the students. A teacher who is unrealistically demanding and only begrudgingly gives praise will take away confidence and self-esteem even from high-achieving students. Students lack the power or ability to make an accurate judgment of their own performance and are easily influenced by their teacher, who is the authority. By focusing solely on mistakes and errors, and thereby ignoring the successful attempts of students, the teacher gives them the false impression that they are failures.

In fact, by simply adjusting his methods of assessing students' performance, a teacher can make foreign language learning interesting, pleasant, and fruitful. Here are a few techniques classroom teachers can use to modify their evaluation procedures and thereby increase student motivation.

Techniques of assessing

Focus on success and achievement

When evaluating students' performance, instead of looking at it with the critical eye of an authoritarian, the teacher should examine the ways his students have been successful. This shift in point of view will change a self-centered teacher who is always worrying about his authority into a teacher with empathy and appreciation.

In foreign language teaching this shift is vital. If a teacher looks at his students' performance overcritically, he will never be satisfied because errors and imperfections are a sure part of learning a foreign language. However, if the teacher focuses on his students' successes, he will be surprised to find how much they are learning and how hard they are trying. There will always be things for the teacher to be proud of.

Once in class, when brainstorming for ideas to eliminate hiccups, one of my colleagues got this piece of advice: eat sweet food. The whole class roared with laughter at this apparently ridiculous suggestion. Just imagine how embarrassed the student who said it would feel if the teacher stood along with the other students and laughed, too! An even worse result would be that other students would be afraid that they could be laughed at, too, so they would choose to remain silent to protect themselves. The brainstorming activity would be ruined. In this instance, however, the teacher merely commented: "That's an interesting idea. Have any of you heard it or tried it?" In a language class, communication in the target language is much more important than finding correct answers.

The benefits of focusing on successes and achievements are manifold. Such a focus can build rapport between teachers and students, help students develop positive self-esteem, make learning pleasant, and, finally, lead to greater effort and success. Showing appreciation of students makes it easier for students to like their teacher, and once that happens, they will take a liking to the subject. Of course,

praise should never be overused, or it will lose its power. The teacher should be observant and give genuine, well-deserved praise in appropriate ways, keeping in mind the cultural values of the learners.

Use objectives-referenced testing

In the science of language testing, there are two types of measurement: norm-referenced and criterion-referenced (Bachman 1990). The former measures a student's performance by comparing it to the performance of other students in the group (Bachman 1990:72–74). The students are arranged along a continuum ranging from the first to the last, or from the best to the worst. The result is contrasting, ranking, and competition.

Norm-referenced evaluation is like athletic competition in that prize winners are scarce. It is even worse: language learners are always competing with the same rivals because the groups of students in classes are usually fixed. There are harmful effects for both the good and the not-so-good students. The former might become conceited or sluggish, for their victories seem to be guaranteed owing to the ability gap between them and the others. The latter students will become silent and humble, lose interest and self-confidence, and eventually give up trying. So norm-referenced evaluation can motivate neither the better students nor the slower ones.

Criterion-referenced evaluation measures a student's performance by comparing it to a defined range of knowledge or skills (Bachman 1990: 74–76). The students are evaluated according to standards, not each other. In classroom teaching, objectives-referenced evaluation relates students' performance to instructional objectives for a specific course, lesson, or task (Henning 1987: 195). This form of criterion-referenced evaluation has clear advantages over the norm-referenced method. It gives all students a chance to succeed as long as they are attaining the teaching objectives. In the long run, students develop positive self-esteem and confidence and the ability to accurately judge their own knowledge and skills.

Objectives-referenced evaluation works well with essays. When marking an essay, a teacher does not just rank it outstanding or satisfactory in comparison with the other students' essays and give a few comments based on a general impression. Instead, the teacher judges it according to how well the student has satisfied the objective(s) of that particular assignment. If, for example, the objective is to develop a topic with supporting details, then this is the standard by which the essay will be judged. The other features of the essay would be dealt with on other occasions or as other assignments.

Objectives-referenced evaluation should be an integral part of the everyday teaching process, because it evaluates teaching results by referring to instructional objectives laid down during the planning stage. A competent teacher will not only pace his teaching properly, but also frequently check whether his teaching has been effective or not.

Teachers should not set unrealistic demands or judgment criteria for their students, but rather depend on objectives referencing to evaluate both their students' performance and their own teaching. If objectives are realistic and appropriate and if teaching activities are effective, most students should be able to meet the requirements, and thus experience success and achievement, despite any ability gaps within a group. In addition, objective-referenced teaching and evaluation encourage everyone to try to reach the set goals.

Analytic assessment

When teachers evaluate students' performance, it should be done as one of several means to help students succeed in learning. Therefore, evaluation is an integral part of the overall teaching process. Through thoughtful, analytic assessment and checking, the teacher can enable himself and his students to see what has been successfully learned and what needs further work.

In helping my first-year university students to improve their English pronunciation and intonation, I have found analytic assessment very effective. This is what I have been doing in recent years: First, I ask my students to record themselves reading a passage. Then I listen to each student's cassette tape and make a note of mispronounced words or flaws in intonation. Next I synthesize and analyze my notes to discover consistently occurring problems in individual speech traits and their possible causes. Finally, I write out my comments and suggestions for action.

In doing this detailed analytic assessment, I have found surprises both for me and for my students, for example:

- My initial and general impressions are sometimes misleading. A poor impression may turn out to have been caused merely by one or two problems, perhaps improper enunciation of word endings, misplaced word stress, or inability to differentiate two sounds owing to mother tongue interference. On the other hand, an initial good impression may cover up problems.

- Students who used to be ashamed of their spoken English may gain confidence from learning that they have to overcome only a few manageable individual habits or traits instead of having to deal with an overwhelming number of mistakes.

- Students are willing to cooperate and they show great enthusiasm to practice when they receive specific feedback on their errors. Such feedback should include specific suggestions for improvement rather than vague comments, such as "You need to improve your pronunciation" or "Your intonation is not natural." With the help of the teacher, students see with their own eyes and hear with their own ears what is good or not-so-good about their spoken English. They know what to maintain and develop, and what to improve on and how.

In contrast to holistic evaluation, analytic assessment points out specific aspects of a student's performance; it is not just an initial or overall impression. It requires synthesizing and analyzing the facts. The teacher must be able to recognize and acknowledge successful work and find and explain possible causes for unsuccessful work.

Tolerance of differences

Every student is unique and differs from other students in such diverse aspects as his family, educational history, learning strategies, and aptitude for foreign language learning (Ellis 1994). To detect merits and achievements in each student, teachers should be aware of the differences and acknowledge them. Teachers need to evaluate students' performance not only in light of their teaching objectives but also with due respect for each student's individual situation. Here are three techniques for improving how we evaluate our students' work:

1. Diachronic evaluation. Follow a student's development and make comparisons between different stages in his learning process to decide whether he is improving or not; specify the areas and extent of improvement.

2. Split method. Notice each learner's strengths as well as weaknesses. Never label a student as "poor," "slow," or "hopeless."

3. Dynamic view. Each day be sensitive to any changes in your students' attitudes, feelings, and accomplishments. Let them know your feelings in an appropriate way. Classes are dynamic and so are students. They can see if their teacher cares about them and wants them to succeed.

Conclusion

Learning a foreign language is a long and complex task. Learners need constant encouragement, and one of the best forms of encouragement comes from a sense of achievement and success. With a keen eye for achievement, an admiring eye for efforts, and a tolerant eye for differences and individuality, a skillful teacher can manage to enable the majority of his students to enjoy learning. A shift in the way we evaluate learners can work wonders.

References

Bachman, L. F. 1990. *Fundamental considerations in language testing.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Ellis, R. 1994. *The study of second language acquisition.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Henning, G. 1987. *A guide to language testing: Development, evaluation and research.* Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press/Heinle and Heinle Publishers/Thompson Learning Asia.

Mu Fengying is an associate professor in applied linguistics at Xuzhou Normal University in Jiangsu, China.