How can we motivate our students?

This is the transcript for Series 3, episode 8 of the TeachingEnglish podcast. You can find out more about the words highlighted in the transcript in the show notes for this episode.

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Teaching English with the British Council

This is episode eight: How can I motivate my students?

We'am: Hello and welcome to this episode of Teaching English with the British Council.

Chris: In this episode, we'll be talking to Liam Printer, a motivational expert with his own podcast on motivation in language teaching, and Azadeh Moladoost, a PhD researcher on this topic.

How motivated are you feeling today?

We'am: Really motivated!

Chris: Why's that?

We'am: Just knowing that the audience is hearing us makes me motivated that maybe they can relate to a lot of the things that we say. When we think about motivation, you think about the psychological needs that needs to be fulfilled. For me, what motivates me, perhaps, is seeing something authentic, seeing students happy in the classroom, reciprocating knowledge, having lively dynamics in the classroom. These things motivate me as a teacher.

Chris: Yeah, and I think what you're saying there it emphasises the two-way nature of motivation, that it's not just one way from teacher to students. It's a two-way dynamic process. You know, teachers can

motivate students, but by doing that students also can motivate teachers, but it's very often we don't see that in the classroom.

We'am: But it's also looking into what is related and what makes other people motivated or happy, because that automatically reciprocates on the teacher as well.

Chris: Yeah, and understanding different things motivate different people, so it's kind of important to have that range of, of different motivating factors within the classroom. But that can be difficult, if you're a busy teacher with lots to do, lots of students.

We'am: If you have a family, for example.

Chris: Exactly, life outside of your work and so on, it can be extremely difficult to do that. So it's something teachers have to sometimes really focus on and concentrate on, and not let, not let slide.

We'am: Yeah, and you need to do it strategically, I think, with time, because it's, it's like a wave, it comes and goes, so it's about also keeping yourself motivated.

Chris: Exactly, so let's surf that wave with our first interview with Liam Printer.

Welcome to the podcast, Liam.

Liam: Thank you very much.

We'am: So when thinking about motivation in education, we often come across lots of terms that seem quite complicated: intrinsic motivation, extrinsic motivation, identified motivation … If you could just summarise in simple language for our listeners some of the core aspects of motivation within education as you see it.

Liam: Yeah, I think in terms of education and getting through to educators and teachers, it is helpful to keep it as simple as possible so that it's easily recognisable and so that it can be put into practice in the classroom. So I think it is helpful just to begin by starting to understand that they are, they are motivators. So, extrinsic motivation is typically something that is coming from an external force. So whether that is grades – like students in your class, like, they're extrinsically motivated to work hard because they want to get a good grade – or it could be through reasons such as fear or pressure: 'I'm going to study my verbs in French tonight because I don't want to look silly in front of my classmates'. So they're all external forces driving me. There's also things like coercion, so when teachers say to students, like, 'You should learn these verbs off because that's what a good student does. That's what a student in our school does.' There's lots and lots of extrinsic motivators. However, what we want to get towards is much more intrinsic motivation where possible. So we know from the research that the more intrinsically motivated a person is, the more positive the learning outcomes are in the long run. And I think that that's the really important thing to remember is that extrinsic motivators do have a place, they do work in the short term, they will get you results tomorrow. But what they won't get is long-term learning and long-term benefits. So when we think about intrinsic motivation, we're thinking about pursuing things out of pure excitement, joy, happiness and satisfaction, usually of those basic psychological needs which are autonomy, competence and relatedness. So if we feel autonomous, like we have some control or ownership over the thing, if we feel like we're able to do it and if we feel a sense of belonging or connection, that's when things are intrinsically motivating. So, you know, if you think of something you enjoy partaking in, Chris or We'am, just purely because you like it, you know, whether that is like playing a game of cards with your friends, whether it's, you know, going to

the driving range and hitting some balls with your golf club, whether it's reading a book quietly on a Saturday afternoon, usually there'll be some of those intrinsic motivators there so maybe, if it's, you know, playing on a sports team, you love playing football on a Sunday morning, you know, quite typically you have choice in that or ownership. You like playing football, you enjoy it, you get some satisfaction because you kind of feel like you can do it, you're good at it. So that's competence. You decided to be there and you have ownership over the movements, how hard you kick the ball, etc. Then you have autonomy. And of course, then you have relatedness, because you've got classmates and people you work with are teammates, you know, you're making relationships there. You've got autonomy, competence, relatedness. So you're doing this because it's intrinsically motivating to you. Now, there may be a tiny extrinsic motivator there that 'If I play well, we're going to win and we might get up to promotion or my wife is going to see me playing well and she's going to be impressed with my skills'. There are tiny extrinsic motivators that can have a little bit of a role, but it's mainly intrinsic. Whereas, let's say We'am just has no interest in football and she doesn't want to play it, but I tell her that she has to go every Sunday and play football for an hour. She's going to do it because she has to or else I'm going to fine her or she's going to lose her job. But she's not doing it out of any reasons that are driven by yourself, so there's no autonomy. She doesn't feel competent. She doesn't feel good at it like she wants to do it. And she's a little bit of relatedness, but she doesn't really connect with the people because she doesn't really like football. So it's not hitting any of her intrinsic motivators, so she's quite demotivated, even though she's been forced by extrinsic motivators to do that.

Chris: How do you feel about that, We'am, in your football journey. Has Liam called it right?

We'am: I can't relate to football, I don't like football, I don't like to watch it. Do you think these core aspects differ when we talk about language teaching?

Liam: No, is the response, I don't think they do. There's a very strong evidence base to suggest that that is not the case. The case is that every human in the world is driven by the same three psychological needs which are autonomy, competence and relatedness.

Chris: Are those drivers different in different contexts, and how should a teacher respond to that?

Liam: The research shows us that every human in the world has these three internal basic psychological needs. Now how they're manifested in the classroom and in what way those pressures manifest is very different. So the learning of English, it's got perceived global importance. And so people think 'Right, it's important that I learn English so that I can go out and work in the world, so that I can travel'. So there are some external things going on there. But at an individual level, you're still being driven by autonomy, competence, relatedness. So you may think 'English is really important, I should learn English', but if in the classroom you are being confronted with a set of activities over which you feel completely incompetent, so way too difficult for you, you will quickly lose motivation for learning English because it's just too hard. Competence is not being met, and you do not feel like you can do it. So you're gonna eventually just switch off and say 'I know English is important, but I just can't do it'. If we plan classes with autonomy, competence and relatedness, then we're also raising their intrinsic motivations, we get the double benefit of the societal external pressure, saying 'English is important, but also I feel like I've got some ownership over it, I feel like I can do it. And I've got good relationships to the content, to the teacher and to the people in my class, so I pay loads of attention, so I learn more, so I feel better about it, so I'm motivated'.

We'am: So how do we apply this in the classroom?

Liam: I won't give away all the secrets now or no one would ever get me in to speak at their schools again. So the thing with motivation is that it's an issue, it's always been an issue and it's going to continue to be an issue. So the first thing is, is that as school leaders who are listening to this are you providing enough autonomy to your teachers at the classroom level to do the things that they want to do and that they're passionate about, so that you drive the learning forward in the long term. So, We'am, your example of football was a great example. If you had a department head or a department chair, who says 'We'am I know you're not into football but, look, we know the kids love it so you need to plan a unit around football and you need to go and talk about it'. Well, you are losing a lot of autonomy there because, I don't know, maybe you're into music instead and you say 'Well, if I could just do a unit on music, then I can really connect with them'. So at a classroom level when we have mandated curricula and exams to prepare for, of course we must do that, like, we have to do that. However, I disagree entirely with teachers who say I don't have time to meet the needs of autonomy, competence and relatedness, because you gain that time back massively later. So a good example, in my current class, let's say we're learning about food and drink, right? Let's say it's a low kind of beginnerish level and we're learning about food and drink. The usual way we do about food and drink is, is kind of lists of vocabulary, like, some pictures. We may ask them, like, you know, what's their favourite meal and we may do a role-play scenario in a restaurant that you're going in to order. All that's fine. Some students will feel autonomous doing that, and some will feel competent, because they're learning it quickly, they've got good memories and they're getting it, or maybe their language is close to English, and they can remember those things quite quickly. Other students will feel really incompetent because they're not getting it as quick as other students. So how can we make that more interesting, more creative, more autonomous for the students? Well, in my class, what we'll do is, I have them all invent the most disgusting milkshake they can. It's called 'The disgusting milkshake competition'. So they've got a list and it's got, like, you know, five liquids, then there's, like, four or five different meats, four or five vegetables, four or five different kind of carbs. Now I haven't given them a list of 28 carbs or 15 different meats. It's just four or five, the main ones, and then they decide what their disgusting milkshake would be. They put it together, they give it a name, they give it a price, they give it a poster, they have to sell it to the class, like, convince them. You then ask the class 'Well, who would eat it or drink it? How much would I have to pay you to eat this or drink this?' 'Oh, I'd do it!' 'How much?' We learned that John would actually eat this disgusting milkshake that has gone-off sushi in it. How on earth would you do that? That's so disgusting. And we're learning about each other. They're learning the language. They're having control over it. They're having autonomy and creativity. So now it's suddenly much more motivating for them but they've still got to the final goal of learning food and drink.

Chris: So what would you say to teachers who work in situations where they perhaps have lower amounts of ==agency==, for example, there to sort of push back against parents?

Liam: I think it's really important to stand your ground as the expert in the room. You know, 'I've got 15 years' experience' or 'I've just completed my master's' or 'I've done a degree' and 'I really think, you know, please judge me by how the students do in the, in the final tests and how fluent they are in the language at the end of the year'. Language acquisition is a process. We need lots of ==comprehensible input==. And if we begin with very complex grammar, the research tells us that most students will switch off and will not be as engaged in that. So maybe I'm more confident at saying that than other teachers because I've done so much reading on it, but I've had to, not often, but I've had to stand my ground once or twice.

We'am: In certain contexts, there are certain skills that students are less motivated to do. Sometimes it has to do with the environment or the education system. I saw that on your website, there was an activity which I really liked, which was assessing fluency through timed writes. Can you tell us a little bit about it?

Liam: Yeah, you're absolutely right, a lot of it is contextual, and a lot of people who are learning English in various parts of the world are learning it due to external forces. So a timed write is typically an activity we do at the end of a period of a couple of weeks when we've done a co-creation of some kind – typically a story or we've done something that involves creativity and we all built together. Now, in those activities, typically the students are doing a huge amount of listening and reading, lots of comprehensible input. So I want to see not really how perfectly accurate their language is, I want to see how quickly the thoughts come to their head. They write as much as they can for five minutes about the story, and it's OK if it's a little bit jumbled up. The goal is fluency. Now, if a student can only write 20/30 words and they've only written, say, four lines, then there's a real lack of fluency there, so they need more inputs. But if most of the class are writing 100/120 words, and when I stop the watch at five minutes, they still want to write, they have a very fluent thought right now in English. So they've reached a fluency level and now it means that I can dig deeper into some of the grammatical aspects or errors that were common among them because the fluency's there. They've got it, they can recall the words quickly. And now it's like, 'OK, we used but, but, but, but, eight times. What are some other words that we could use instead of but? How else could we say that to begin a sentence?' And now they're ready for that, so that's how those timed writes work. And the big thing here is competence. If you can write all that in five minutes, look how much you can do. They feel competent, like 'Whoa, I could write all that in English and I've only been listening to this story for a week'. So suddenly, the psychological need of competence is firing. And they're just like 'Oh, I can do this'. And now they pay more attention. And now I can teach them more.

Chris: Liam, thank you so much for sharing your thoughts today.

We'am: I really liked the milkshake activity.

Chris: Yeah, what would you put in your milkshake, We'am?

We'am: Something disgusting, maybe beans.

Chris: Beans. OK, so you've been living in the UK for a while now. What British food would you put in your milkshake?

We'am: I'm ashamed to say, but all British food. I'm really sorry.

Chris: So you'd put all British food in one milkshake and then mix it all together.

We'am: I find it not really tasty, unfortunately, not my favourite cuisine.

Chris: So Liam mentioned three particular components of goal-directed behaviours, which are really important for understanding motivation, so autonomy, competence and relatedness. Maybe you could just share your reflections on each of those terms, We'am. So, autonomy firstly. What is that and how does that transpire in the classroom?

We'am: Well, with autonomy, when students feel that they have control over their learning, they are more engaged and motivated. So one thing could be by offering them choices and even in the way they learn best. So, for example, showing them videos as opposed to texts, maybe interactive.

Chris: Sometimes these choices don't have to be big things. It can simply be saying to them 'You could do this activity as a piece of writing or as a piece of speaking. You can do it on your own. You can do it with a partner.' But it's giving them those small choices that don't necessarily affect the outcome too much, but

which makes them feel they're in charge. So sometimes it doesn't have to be big things. It can be just those small things. How about competence?

We'am: With competence, it's the confidence in one's ability, making it incremental, aligned with their level, just slightly above their level to challenge them, so that they feel that they are learning something.

Chris: And to feel that if they meet that level, they've exceeded where they were before, so they get that sense of real progression, that they've been able to do something that they couldn't do before, they know something that they didn't know previously.

We'am: And one thing that can show that difference between how their skills were before learning this and how it progressed throughout the course is by portfolios, for example.

Chris: Absolutely. It can be hugely motivating to, to see that, to see … and then they're measuring their progress against themselves. You know, too often we emphasise progress in terms of against other students in the class, but the real progress is, is how we, yeah, can challenge ourselves to develop ourselves.

We'am: Yeah, you can, for example, give them at the end of the year the chance to present one work that they felt very good about.

Chris: And they can feel that pride in sharing it with their friends and parents or whoever it might be to do that.

We'am: Because it's personalised, also. It's like you're giving them that space to express also.

Chris: You're also giving them the autonomy to decide which one they want to, want to share.

We'am: What about relatedness, Chris?

Chris: So, yeah, relatedness, yeah, feeling connected to other people in the room. And there's lots of ways you can do that, like through task-based learning or project-based learning, where different people have different roles to play within that particular group. It can be also just in the class atmosphere and what the teacher does there, so that just people can trust each other, the fact they can work with different students, the fact they are not doing the same thing every time. It's that idea of having an expectation about what is going to happen, but there could be slight differences as well. So it's not, it's not boring, but there is a safety there, there is a routine, but the teacher can also play a little bit with that as well. So it's all of those different things. To feel like the classroom is a place that I want to be, a place where I can be myself, I can develop myself, because that's where really good learning flourishes.

We'am: In our second interview, we will speak to Azadeh Moladoost, a PhD researcher, looking, among other things, at teacher motivation.

Hello and welcome. Perhaps we can start with a little bit about your experience, how you were initially interested in the area of motivation, or how that is linked to your personal experience as an educator and a teacher.

Azadeh: Hi, thank you so much for having me here. The topic is very interesting for me, as I have been, you know, a teacher for more than ten years. I have been teaching university-level ESP courses and general specific English courses. And in my own practice, motivation has always been something very

relevant to my context, because we had to follow some of the ==rubrics== identified by my department. I had no, let's say, power to change many things. So it was even for me, demotivating. So I need to find, you know, ways to change, you know, everything in favour of keeping myself motivated and also my students. So it has actually been very important for me.

Chris: It's really interesting you say about how you were feeling demotivated in, because of the system you were in, because of the institutions that you were in. And I think a lot of our listeners may feel something similar, that they have to teach a particular textbook, they have to teach in a particular way. They don't feel they have that sort of freedom. What can teachers do if they feel like that?

Azadeh: First, I started working on feedback for teachers. How can teachers use their own students' feedback to improve their practice? And after teachers started talking to their students, they find that there are some discrepancies, you know, and differences between teachers' expectations, students' expectations, and sometimes teachers just realise that students are not aware of some of the limitations. When I started talking based on those feedbacks, that feedback would just I can say that was a stimuli to start a very constructive discussion between teacher, on the one side, and his or her students, but that discussion helped them to find a new, ==revitalising== atmosphere in their own classrooms, to understand each other better, to understand their own context, and sometimes finding some solutions. For example, maybe the teacher couldn't change the coursebook. They should teach the same thing. They should cover this, the number of lessons and everything. But OK, if the, er, students are interested in some extra activities, OK, we can, I can guide you, you know, to some extra activities, some extra materials. One of the other things was that, after the talkings, based on the students' feedback, students actually were admitting that we feel that we are more responsible for our own learning because we are in this situation. Nothing … many, many factors are, you know, available here that maybe work against us, you know, the system, everything that is identified first, but so we can be, let's say, more responsible learners and can use our own capacity more. We should be, you know, responsible for checking our own development. Everything is not on the shoulders of the teacher. Teacher is there to help us to facilitate our own learning. These discussions was really, I guess, beneficial for both, both of them.

Chris: What's crucial is that both students and teachers feel they have some sort of agency over what's happening and that is what is directly linked to motivation. If they, if you feel you lack agency, you lack control, you're not sure where things are going, and therefore your motivation is less.

Azadeh: Yeah, exactly. When you become aware of that, so you can find your lost motivation maybe. You can find substitutions for that and finding some creative ways to just reimburse for that lack of agency and control over that situation.

We'am: If you can just explain a little bit more maybe about autonomy and its role in motivating learners.

Azadeh: Yeah, exactly. You know, when students feel that they have a say in their own classroom – they can talk about their own needs, they can talk about their emotions, whether they feel satisfied, happy or sad about what's going on in that classroom – it's empowering for students. The main things cannot be changed, but they can have saying on, you know, let's say, some minor things in the classroom, and that gives them positive feelings, and they feel that they can collaborate with their teacher. This is not the teacher who is just at the centre of the classroom. We are also there to control our learning process, and we can have a saying over that.

We'am: Do you think that there are sometimes, in certain contexts, some contextual factors that affect the motivation of teachers?

Azadeh: Of course, of course, most of the, you know, based on my own experience, I can say that many, many motivating factors were coming from outside, you know, and maybe sometimes I have no way to fight against them and to solve the problem, because it's totally out of my control. So my only strategy was, has always been, you know, looking inside myself, because you find solutions from inside.

Chris: Even in a situation when you feel stuff's out of control, oppressive structures, no choice, all of those sorts of things, within a classroom space, most of the time, there's something you can do, even if it's not a big gesture or big act, smaller things you can do to take control, and once you take that control, you can feel more motivated. You look forward more to the teaching, or you look forward more to the learning, depending if you're a teacher or student.

Azadeh: Yeah, exactly, yeah, exactly. Small acts, you know, even very small changes for improvement, you can see that there would be positive results. I believe that motivation is somehow synergistic concept, you know, between teacher and a student.

We'am: Yeah, and there are, there are different tools, I mean, these days, to also connect with communities online and share similar sentiments with other teachers. I found also that approach is very autonomous, and at the same time it does change.

Azadeh: Yeah, I can just say that you're, you're right, you know, collaboration, you know, and talking about the ideas and, you know, just making connections is very helpful. But, you know, the thing that I focused on was, you know, something that was very personal for teachers themselves, in their own classroom and within their own, you know, practice. They could find the sources for professional development without being connected, you know, and dependent on outsources, other sources. That was the interesting thing for me. And of course, based on that, they were, the teachers can say that, you know, you can go and find after that, you can find help from your colleagues. You have a problem, so I've thought about it a lot and I can talk to one of my colleagues who I can trust and find a solution for that, you know. But the starting point was from within the teacher and within the classroom.

We'am: So if there are any teachers who are demotivated, what advice would you give them?

Azadeh: For demotivated teachers, I can say that teaching is a passion. Those who go for teaching have really, you know, a deep-seated passion. So, again, you should think about that. That's why I'm teaching and why I'm in this, you know, profession. So if that is something that I love, so I should keep the, you know, that burning fire from within. If I want to try to seek, you know, help from others, and want, you know, to, for example, correct the system, correct the disciplines, whatever that is out there, there are lots of difficulties and challenges and shortcomings that overshadow motivation or enthusiasm, everything. The thing is integrating teacher research into practice, I guess, is one of the best motivating strategies for teachers.

We'am: And that reminds me of a quote I read yesterday, is that the key for motivation is to maintain your ability of questioning. Thank you so much for a great discussion.

Chris: One of the things we wanted to do in this episode was to also talk about teacher motivation, because I think it's something which often gets forgotten about. We talk a lot about student motivation, but not so much teacher motivation. When you're working in challenging situations – post-Covid, children coming back to school who haven't been in school for a long time, difficult economic situations, war, all these things – being a teacher can be a really, really challenging thing to do. You know, you are facing all of these things, and if you are trusted by your children, your students, they will want to talk to you about

these things, and it can be quite overwhelming sometimes to have to work with your students on these issues. So it's no surprise really that teachers can often feel demotivated in these situations. What were some of the main things coming out of that interview with Azadeh that you found, We'am, that you think teachers can do in their own practice to feel more motivated?

We'am: I found that researching and knowing more about teaching motivated me. It differs from one person to another, but also having support group with other teachers, sharing and talking, giving feedback, sharing reflections with other teachers. It all gave me motivation, because it's also about the dynamic aspect of teaching.

Chris: So if you understand more about it, you can feel more in control. But it's also by sharing your experience with trusted friends and colleagues, you can learn more. And I think some of the most motivated teachers I've seen are those who are able to share not just the good things that have happened in their classroom but also the things that didn't work so well.

We'am: And for other people, it's always sharing the bad things but not the good things.

Chris: Yeah, it's a mixture. Teaching is a mixture of all of it. Life is like a mixture of all of these, these things. So it's kind of important to do that, to, you know, and look at it as a journey which we're, we're all going on together.

We'am: Yeah. And also administrations in schools shouldn't take that for granted. I mean, we are humans, and we go through ups and downs, so it's very important also that management is supportive of teachers and provide them with that space where they can share, reflect and learn from each other, and not feel burdened by not sharing, but should be like an open space for teachers.

Chris: Absolutely and, you know, if you're in administration, a head teacher, senior management, you know, the thing you should be afraid of the most is a demotivated workforce. You know, that is the absolute … whatever else is going on – you have the best classrooms, the best facilities, everything like that – but if your workforce is not motivated, then that's a crisis, you know. And I think administrations need to work hand in hand with teachers and teacher groups in order to achieve that.

So what's one tip you would give to teachers who are feeling demotivated, We'am?

We'am: I would say work from the bottom up, as in, if you have the content that is relatable for students, then it's easier to adjust your methods to reach the goal for that class.

Chris: If they're already interested in the subject matter, in the text, in the audio, in the video, whatever it is, that's one fight you don't have to have.

Thank you for listening to episode 8 of Teaching English with the British Council on how we can motivate our students. Please join us next time, for episode 9: How can we use the creative arts to teach English? And in the meantime, please like and subscribe.

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