

Motivating Young Learners



Motivation is a hot topic. It is also one of the most challenging areas when we are teaching young learners. After all, there's nothing worse than going into a class full of people who don't really want to be there. You see, unlike adults, younger learners probably don't have much say about being in your classroom. Usually their parents will have placed them there. There may be some tacit agreement on the part of the young learner, in the choice that they have made (English vs. another extra curricular subject), but usually they have little say in the matter. Also, adults often have to pay for their place in your classroom, which gives them a higher level of motivation to ensure that their learning succeeds. Younger learners invariably do not. This has an impact on their motivation in class and hence their overall performance.

One of the skills that we as teachers can bring into the classroom is that of successfully motivating students to learn. So it is important for us to take an active role in trying to improve the motivation levels of our younger learners groups. Think about it for a moment - a highly motivated group of students is usually going to be easier to teach. So we are the ones responsible for creating the right 'motivational environment' for our learners to grow and develop their knowledge of the language.

In essence, we need to create a supportive classroom where students can feel comfortable. We need to demonstrate that we are in control and can run the classroom effectively, utilising appropriate discipline techniques. The nature of our own behaviour in the classroom is going to be crucial if we are to be:

- a) an effective role model for our students
- b) able to establish an effective rapport and group dynamic
- c) enthusiastic and able to generate enthusiasm in our students towards learning

To be motivated to learn, students need both opportunities to learn and steady encouragement and support of their learning efforts. Because such motivation is unlikely to develop in a chaotic classroom, it is important that the teacher organise and manage the classroom as an effective learning environment.

So in this section we will first look at how we can motivate our young learners to learn. Following on from this we will examine how we can best motivate our primary aged young learners, before moving on to look at how we can help to motivate our teenage learners.

Motivating Primary-aged Learners

In my experience as a teacher of young learners, they need stimulation from the start of the lesson to the final minute. From the moment they enter the classroom, to the minute they leave, something needs to be happening. This is partly because at this age (3-11 years) our students tend not to be goal orientated. There is no ability to see the future or to understand whether their English is or is not improving. At this age level, young learners are generally unable to see past the activity they are engaged in, so as teachers we need to encourage immediate motivation. This motivation must come from the task we as a class are doing at the present time.

So it is crucial that we incorporate a fun element into our lessons, so that learners at this level enjoy what they are doing. As we said in our analysis of young learners earlier, young learners will enjoy being challenged within their ability range, but they will learn more if they are enjoying what they are doing. So remember to not let your students get bored. They need to be engaged and active. A tip here is to have lots of activities prepared and not make them too long – long enough for them to be interesting but not so long that students lose interest. Vary your tasks too. For example, don't make them all 'drawing' activities. Students who don't like drawing will soon latch on to the fact that in Ms. X's lesson 'all we do is drawing'. The dislike of the method of learning will quickly develop into dislike of the subject itself.



But it is not all about having fun in the classroom. Having lots of activities up our sleeves is not going to work all by itself. Yes, we can reward our students when they do well, and indeed we should. But there are more effective motivational strategies that we can employ to be successful at this level as well. So here we look at five key elements that will help to keep our young learners interested in the lesson.

1. The Importance of Planning

Planning is crucial to successful motivation. When you are planning, think about what your young learners will be interested in doing. Where possible, use a young learner course book at a targeted age level for your class. Build your lesson around part of the book, but remember to think about what we have said regarding attention span. We need to understand and accept how quickly your young learners will lose interest in what they are doing and how easily they may become distracted.

Question 1

On this page we are going to ask you to do some research. Longman has produced some excellent rules on planning activities for young learners, which we really like. They explain in really simple terms what each teacher needs to think about when planning activities for this age of learner. They are bullet pointed on the following page:

<http://www.global-english.com/tipsfromthetop.htm>

In your answer booklet, we would like you to make a note of these 12 rules. Please bullet point them in your own words, as this will help you to learn and remember them. Then underneath this, answer the following questions:

1. What is the difference between a 'stirrer activity' and a 'settler activity'? Can you give an example of each?
2. Why is sequencing our activities important?
3. One of the rules is to 'plan for time'. What does this mean? In your own words (around 100), say why you think that failing to plan for time can turn a good lesson plan into an unsuccessful lesson.

Go to Answer Booklet, Question 1

If we get our planning right, this can go quite a long way to helping us become successful YL teachers. We hope that this article has given you a flavour of what is a very important area – one which we will come back to and deal with in more depth later in the course. But there are several other ways in which we can help to generate high levels of motivation in our young learner classrooms. Here are just a few of our suggestions:

2. Giving Praise

Young learners really respond well to praise when they have done something well, or made an effort to try something new or something that they find particularly challenging. If you can reward this then you will see motivation levels increase. One way to achieve this is through a Star chart. It is really simple and easy to set up.

Draw up a chart with all your students' names down one side. Explain to students how you are going to award stars and what you are going to award them for. At the end of each activity or task, or at relevant points during the class, mark a smiley face or a star on the chart for your special performers. Remember to reward with consistency, while taking time to support those who may not be able to achieve quite so well. Getting a star can really be a great motivator for younger learners – you'll see the results in beaming faces and renewed efforts in future activities.

3. Reinforce and Repeat with Fun Activities

Young learners like familiarity, so if you find a popular game or activity that your youngsters enjoy, don't be afraid to use it frequently. For example, you can use a game format to revise new vocabulary and/or grammar from the previous lesson. This will help to ensure that there is some continuation from lesson to lesson, and you will be able to see if students have learnt the work.

4. Vary your material

Even though students do like familiar activities, it is still important to vary your material. After all, students will get bored with doing the same type of activity day in day out. So use a variety of different materials: TV/video programmes for visual stimulation, games for active participation, an overhead projector to display something or tape recorder to tape your younger learners speaking English. Alternatively, use colourful images from the internet or use paints and colouring pens/pencils to get students doing interesting activities in English. Try to introduce new ways of doing things – in this way you will be able to re-present material or learning points that you have covered before in a way that seems new and exciting for your students.

5. Be consistent in your Approach

At this age, students like secure surroundings – and routines can help the learning process. As with the idea in number 2 (above), think about ending your lessons with something which is familiar to them. This will let them know that the lesson is coming to an end – indeed it may give them that final push and lead to you leaving on a positive note. Some ideas that we have used before including finishing lessons with a song, or if they have been really well behaved and tried hard to learn what you have been teaching, you might choose to reward students with a favourite game.

It is also important for you to be consistent. If the lesson aim has been achieved, let them know that you are pleased with their progress. Praise is a wonderful stimulator and can really help to encourage your young learners.

Again, these are just a few ideas and later in the course you will find more, when we take a closer look at material for these students. However, it is now time to turn our attention to our 'older' young learners, so find out if we can see what makes teens tick!