Can Motivation Be Disruptive?

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ABSTRACT
Student motivation is a common concern for the novice and veteran teacher of many subjects including teaching English as a foreign language (EFL). In this teaching journal I record the process of identifying a classroom issue regarding motivation and how its particular manifestation had a potentially negative impact on achieving the course goals. I discuss my provisions as well as provide some insights from the relevant literature for how to use strategies to mitigate the fluctuations and differences in levels and types of motivations among learners. This is particularly germane to a classroom that requires group participation and interdependence in order to realize beneficial outcomes from the learning process.

INTRODUCTION
Teachers, researchers, and scholars have observed that a lack of proper student motivation in a language learning environment can present problems with respect to attaining course goals (Dörnyei, 1998). In particular, if oral language production in a group discussion is identified as a goal, then lack of motivation is obviously an issue. However, a motivation which is profusely disruptive in a group discussion can impede attaining course goals as well. Even though a learner may be functional in a language, if he or she finds the discussion inconsequential and decides to instead parody the expectation to participate meaningfully, this type of motivation to detract from the conduct in a discussion can lead to problems in classroom management and in ensuring that all students gain sufficient and adequate speaking time to express their thoughts and ideas.

This journal concerns one of my first year, second semester, university EFL classes as the focus for examining student motivation in the context of a discussion class. The class is a high-intermediate level relative to the majority of the students in the English Discussion Class (EDC) program. In the article, I discuss primarily one student and the effect his behavior has on other students and the class as a whole. For reasons of confidentiality, the student will be referred to as “Taro”.

Taro was shrewdly disruptive in the discussions beginning after the first few weeks of the course. The importance of this disruption concerns group cohesion which is important to establish in these discussion classes due to several factors. One factor is the requirement that students share their independent ideas about the discussion topics which often necessitates conveying differing opinions. This requires some courage on the part of the students, so if disruptive behavior is manifested by a student, it can adversely affect the success in fully exchanging ideas in the discussions. Furthermore, the students’ opportunity to practice the communication strategies and formulaic phrases called “functions” that we teach them so they can organize their thoughts and ideas in a coherent discussion, might be restricted.

DISCUSSION
In my teaching journal between lessons 4 and 9, some disruptive incidents were recorded. During the first incident in the third lesson, Taro was obviously overusing the target phrase which was the word “if” to be used to talk about possibilities. He would say a long, somewhat incoherent opinion (not because he lacked speaking skills, but he was apparently trying to confound his group mates), then he would ask “Does anyone want to comment?” whereupon he would quickly answer the question himself by saying “If nothing, why don’t we discuss [topic]?”
This behavior resulted in a somewhat disjointed and lopsided discussion. Nevertheless, I was able to give useful feedback to all of the students, as well as assign grades for all of the students’ performance in the discussions for the class session in this the event’s first instance.

The tenor of Taro’s discourse was very obvious in his decision to use the word “if” in any possible way imaginable that I instantly knew he was being jocular. At the time I just thought it was due to the rather thin content of language to practice for the lesson. Admittedly, I thought mainly focusing on using this sole conditional without any further challenges in the lesson might prove to be beneath the skill level of most of the participants. However, I just decided that the error was on my behalf in not preparing more challenging material to augment the stated aims of the lesson.

In lesson 4 the topic was a review of the communication skill, agreeing and disagreeing. Again, this is obviously a skill the students reviewed not only in the previous semester, but presumably throughout their secondary education. Taro continued his antics but this time they were more pronounced. In the first discussion he would feign an attempt to ask a question or make a statement using “if” by stammering his utterance for an unusually long period of time. I could have attributed this to a common fluency issue that most EFL students experience during development, but he would use rather high-level, low frequency words in his utterances, stop and try to reformulate his statement, and then abandon the attempt only then to say “Does anyone want to comment?” whereupon his group members would laugh. He would then take this as a cue to further this behavior and either change the topic needlessly or wait for someone to utter a shortened comment. He would respond to others by asking for a reason unnecessarily or another function question. For instance, he would ask “How come?, Why? uh, Why do you think so?” in a concatenate manner which would elicit another laugh from the group. It was apparent that he was trying to say only function phrases and incoherent ramblings to “score points”. His actions prevented others from fully expressing ideas or speaking at all because either his stammered utterances were so long that students never had a chance to speak, or they laughed and only replied with curt statements that he either interrupted or were purposely short to encourage his behavior more.

After the first discussion, I addressed the issue during my feedback. I said, “I heard many people use ‘if’. For example Taro said ‘if’ 1000 times”. The students chuckled and I laughed along with them, but I then told Taro, “Please don’t speak so much in the discussion because other students can’t speak in the discussions and I can’t hear the discussions because you are telling so many jokes.” He agreed but in the second discussion he displayed the same behavior. This engendered more laughter and co-dependent participation from his group. His disruption was so prominent that it was difficult to focus on grading the performance of the discussion group. After class, I spoke to him in a very polite and deliberate demeanor. This is an approximation of our dialogue.

Aaron: Taro, can I ask you a question?
Taro : Yes
Aaron: Is this class too easy for you?
Taro : Yes. I am in ESS club and I have discussion every day, so it is a little easy.
Aaron: OK, I understand. I can hear that you are a good English speaker, but you are disrupting the class. Other students can’t speak in the discussions and I can’t hear the discussions because you are telling so many jokes.
Taro : Oh.
Aaron: This class is not just a joke.
Taro : OK
Aaron OK, thank you.
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I highly anticipated the next class to see if this had any effect. I wrote a general note in my feedback comments for the students on the class website. The following remark is the comment I wrote.

“Please try to be a little more serious in the discussions. Of course I would like everyone to have fun, but I can’t help you improve your discussion skills if you are not participating respectfully. Improving your discussion skills is the purpose of this class. Please help me to help you.”

I naturally felt perplexed by his behavior because his manner showed a lack of consideration for the purpose of the class. According to Dörnyei, essential preconditions for generating an effective motivational environment are “appropriate teacher behaviors and a good relationship with the students; a pleasant and supportive classroom atmosphere; and a cohesive learner group with appropriate group norms.” (Dörnyei, 2001, p. 31) I ordinarily spend the first two weeks of class establishing these environmental elements and it was no different in this class. Therefore it puzzled me when he decided not to take my direction and continued disrupting the class. My assessment of him at this point is that he feels the class is ridiculous, and not worth his best effort or respectful participation.

**Observed Changes**

In week five, after my chat with him, the student seemed a little contrite and I did not sense that he was uncomfortable nor did he show any overt anger toward my attempt at correcting his behavior. He allowed others to speak and his utterances were not as extended. Also, in lesson 6 his behavior in the discussions was not as disruptive as it had been the initial week. Although Taro’s behavior had seemingly been rectified, I stayed vigilant to perceive any relapse in his distracting activity.

I had originally attributed the motivation for Taro’s behavior to the content of the lessons. Therefore, in week six when we practiced paraphrasing, I anticipated that this skill would be more of a challenge for the class as a whole and thusly I could engage his and their interest in English a little more. The basis for this expectation is that I have surmised that Taro may be instrumentally motivated. This is due to his likely “pragmatic and utilitarian reasons” (Ortega, 2009) for studying English. Ortega has further characterized instrumental motivation as being present when reasons such as getting a better job or pursuing a higher level of education in the L2 are orientating factors. (Ortega, 2009, p. 173) Additionally, since Taro is in the English Speaking Society (ESS club), there may be a link between his expectations for this course and his involvement in extra-curricular English speaking activities. This may be the cause for his reduced yet continued fascination with using the discussions as a way to engage in disruptive jokes, rather than meaningful discussions with peers.

In the discussions for lesson 7, Taro did not use the overt manner of extending his utterances, but he did make gratuitous uses of the target function phrases (reporting information) and previous function phrases. I had given the instruction to the students to use the previous week’s function (paraphrasing) to check the meaning of each other’s ideas after a sufficient amount of information had been reported. One minute into the discussion, he asked a student who was making a statement about the topic, which was about important qualities needed to become famous, “Where did you hear about that?” to which the original speaker replied, “I watched it on TV”. Taro’s response was, “Do you mean you watched that information on TV?” whereupon the group started to laugh. So as can be understood in this example, he was
continuing his behavior although more subtly. At the time I was unsure if he was just trying to score points or if my other suspicions are correct, namely that he was using the class as a platform for gaining attention by lampooning the class content and format due to his perception that the content is too simplistic for him.

Causes for Behavior Change
During the week when the first incident occurred, I gave Taro the lowest grades possible on his language usage. I think my dual remedy of speaking to him and giving a low grade for his discussion score during the week of the first disruption (week 4) has made a slight impact on his outlook and desire to pass the class. Even though by lesson 7 he was still displaying a minute amount of the behavior he exhibited before, it was not to the same degree. So, my plan at this point was to keep setting high expectations and monitoring his behavior. It should be noted that I delayed implementing a provision for one week because I assumed the original incident would be an isolated occurrence. Unfortunately, it was not. Therefore, I remained cognizant of the possibility that after the second of three discussion tests he would revert because most of the grades will have been entered and his passing grade will be assured.

CONCLUSION
Taro’s performance in the test confirmed my previous suspicions that he would simply do what was necessary to pass. Taro fulfilled the quantitative requirement for the test by uttering an allotment of function phrases, but he ceased verbal participation at the midpoint of the 16 minute time limit. I think Taro and his involvement in the ESS club and other English language learning environments has affected his manner of involvement in EDC. I suspect he is more motivated to use English as a tool for personal advancement rather than to be involved in a social manner with English speakers in general. I concluded from a reading of Dornyei (2001) that describing the purpose of the discussions and how these functions apply to the goals of the class overall would be quite valuable. Additionally, finding out the needs and goals of the learners would be useful. For example by “using needs analysis techniques” I could ask learners “which skills they consider important and what language related goals they have” (Dornyei, 2001). After taking these steps and obtaining this information from the outset of the course, I could make an agreement with learners to infuse their interests and goals in tasks and activities. These implementations would help learners like Taro see more value in challenging his own perceived ability, instead of viewing the EDC as a necessary but unsatisfying obstacle to their ultimate aims.

REFERENCES