

STUDENTS MOTIVATION: THE MOVING WHEEL IN THE CLASSROOM, AN INVESTIGATION INTO STATE UNIVERSITIES

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ABSTRACT

Nowadays, the topic of students' motivation in the classroom has attracted a great deal of attention. Many pieces of research have been conducted in this area due to its ultimate importance in enhancing students' understanding, increasing their level of participation in the class and as a result improving their overall outcomes. This paper attempts to shed light on one of the most contemporary and challenging issues, students' motivation at the Syrian state universities. Both qualitative and quantitative methods of data collection have been used in this research. The findings of the current study shed light on the fact that lecturers used variety of techniques in order to enhance students' motivation during lectures.

Keywords: Students, Motivation, State Universities, Syrian Context.

INTRODUCTION

Undoubtedly, teaching of English has become an important goal in most countries around the world. This is due to the pivotal importance of English language as an international means of communication. However, English language teachers have faced some challenges in finding the most effective means for motivating students in the class. Although, teachers have exerted a great deal of efforts to motivate students in the classroom, students' motivation level at Syrian state universities is not at the desirable level. The study is an attempt to answer the following question: how are students motivated to participate in the lesson?

The present study is an attempt to focus on this problematic issue where we will shed light on the students' motivation in the classroom, and the main methods adopted by the Syrian lecturers for involving students more in the class.

As for the contribution of this study and to the best my knowledge, many studies have shed light on students' motivation in the classroom in different contexts, however no study spots light on motivation for university students in the Syrian context. In the next section, the researcher will comb and review the related literature and studies. Section three will present the results and discussion whereas section four will be the conclusion which summarizes the research main findings and presents recommendations and suggestions.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Motivating Students

Undoubtedly, "*motivation is crucial to succeed in educational matters and without the fighting spirit nothing is possible not only in education but also in real life*" (Gopalan et al.,

2017). Thus, teachers need to motivate their students and make them enjoy the pleasure of reading comprehension in a foreign language as an interesting and useful habit that can be extended beyond the classroom limits. As motivation can positively affect students' reading performance (Wang & Gan, 2021), teachers need to create a supportive learning environment and instructional techniques that enhance the development of the learners with different cultures, backgrounds and needs. Activating students' background experiences about the topic and relating the text to their prior experiences can greatly motivate students (Macalister, 2011). There are limitless benefits of motivation and as indicated by Cho et al. (2021) "*motivated students are well-known for likely mastering learning content, believing that they can control their learning, valuing what they learn, and exhibiting confidence about their learning and performance*" (Wang & Gan, 2021).

Moreover, classroom procedures involving pair work and group work can greatly encourage learners to make use of what they have read, increase their confidence and create a friendly learning environment. As stressed by Harmer (2007) and Barkley (2007), students reading skills thrive in educational contexts in which they feel supported and cared for.

Furthermore, choosing interesting reading materials and topics that are at the students' age and level is an essential step for motivating students (Harmer, 2001; Hudson, 2009; Kelly & Safford, 2008; Washtell, 2015).

Most importantly, teachers' oral feedback can play a pivotal role in helping students build confidence by offering positive comments, rewards and other incentives for students' reading efforts. According to Wong & Waring (2009) "*one function of utterances such as 'very good' is to praise and reinforce a student's effort in giving a correct response*". In the context of language teaching, this means reinforcing correct comprehension or production of a language structure in tune with the teaching goals.

Interestingly, in the educational context, there are two main theories of motivation that can greatly influence students' achievements. First, the instinct theory which is considered as a prominent source of motivation. It mainly focuses on biological causes; that all human beings share the same sense of self-motivation. It encourages students to participate in academic activities for the sake of internal desires; for enjoying a sense of achievement, satisfaction, or completion. It is an end by itself where the gained knowledge is sustained for a long time. By contrast, extrinsic motivation focuses on external activities such as rewards. Students' achievements are means to an end where the ultimate end is the incentive. This type of motivation entails a great level of commitment and involvement. However, knowledge is not sustained for long as is the case with intrinsic motivation. This type of motivation should be applied wisely as overdependence on it could lead to negative effects; students' undesired conditional performance where they only perform well an incentive is awarded.

METHODOLOGY

In fact, the methods used in this research are both qualitative and quantitative ones in order to collect rich data and provide the research framework. The participants involved in this study were a sample of twenty-four Syrian lecturers who were teaching English as a foreign language. Twelve lecturers were teaching at Syrian state universities whereas the remaining twelve lecturers were teaching at Syrian private universities. The current study lasted about seven months where the researchers started the research from 01-02-2020 to 20-09-2020.

Data were collected over a period of three months. Syrian state universities were involved in this study; these are located in the East part of Syria (Deir-Ezzor). These twelve lecturers were

asked to answer the questionnaires while four of them were interviewed by the researchers. From a statistical point of view, the group consisted of nine males and three females, with ages ranging from 26 to 53. Because of the lecturers' different ages, their teaching experiences varied; it ranged from 2 years teaching experience up to 22 years teaching experience. The lecturers were 5 graduate teaching assistance, 2 MA holders and 5 Ph.D. holders. Based on the nature of this study, different types of instruments were designed for data collection, namely questionnaires, interviews, and classroom observation. Unfortunately, the unstable conditions in Syria (Syrian conflict) at the time of conducting the research, made it difficult for the researchers to conduct the classroom observation. Thus, the Semi-structured interviews and questionnaires were the instruments used for data collection and for obtaining first-hand and more naturalistic data from the research participants. To ensure the feasibility and effectiveness of the study and for ideally gathered data, the questionnaire was complemented by a semi-structured interview. So, these two different research methods can offer variation of interpretation regarding the results of the study.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents an account of and a discussion of the current research results that were obtained by analyzing the questionnaires and the interviews.

How are students motivated to participate in the lesson?

Students can make predictions by	State Universities
Reading titles	70%
Reading conclusion	20%
Looking at illustration	60%
Reading introduction	20%

Table1 clearly shows that most of Syrian lecturers believed that pre-reading predictions can motivate students during reading comprehension classes. This could be because lecturers were aware of the idea that making predictions on the reading material could motivate students and help them establish expectations about it (Buendía & Ortega-Martín, 2018). Lecturer D from a state university clearly stressed the importance of pre-reading activities, she declared that:

Furthermore, predictions might familiarize students with the reading material, activate their prior knowledge and facilitate their understanding of what they read.

According to table1, the majority of lecturers at Syrian state universities encouraged students to make predictions on the reading materials either by looking at the titles (70%) or the illustrations (60%). The following chart presents the motivation strategies adopted at state universities.

Figure 1 displays the motivation strategies used by Syrian lecturers at state universities; only 10% of the lecturers asked students to work in pairs or groups as a motivation technique. That was probably due to concerns over classroom management during these kinds of activities, especially when considering the huge number of students; there could be more than 300 students attending the lecture. In practice, pair work and group work necessitate a good classroom management as unsupervised pair or group work may lead students to relax and chat in their native language (Baleghizadeh, 2010). Furthermore, with a great number of students, these activities might be ineffective and time consuming. Based on the questionnaire data, it was obvious that the lecturer, who indicated using these strategies, was less experienced than other

lecturers who avoided using pair work and group work. Lecturer B clearly presented her view on pair and group work: *“It would be very difficult to manage the class during these activities. They are hopeless and helpless when adopted in a classroom that contains a great number of students.... I will never think about adopting them during my lectures”*.

Concerning choosing interesting texts, chart 1 show that 50% of these lecturers preferred using interesting texts for motivating students and increasing their reading skills and understanding. In this way, lecturers at state universities might be selective; choosing materials that could be interesting for their students. As pointed out by Williams (1986), *“interest is vital for it increases motivation, which in turn is a significant factor in the development of reading speed and fluency”*.

Many researchers emphasized the undeniable role of interesting materials in increasing students’ motivation and improving their reading skills (Hudson, 2009; Kelly & Safford, 2008; Washtell, 2015). By contrast, some lecturers did not mainly focus on interesting materials. This could be due to many reasons such as, those lectures might not have enough teaching experience or even enough time to choose interesting materials or because they were concerned with teaching the materials they had without any deviation. Another possible reason was the one presented by lecturer A when he was asked about his view concerning interesting materials: *“Well, I think that the main purpose of the reading comprehension class is to teach students how to better read or understand the reading texts or passages rather than focusing on interesting materials”*.

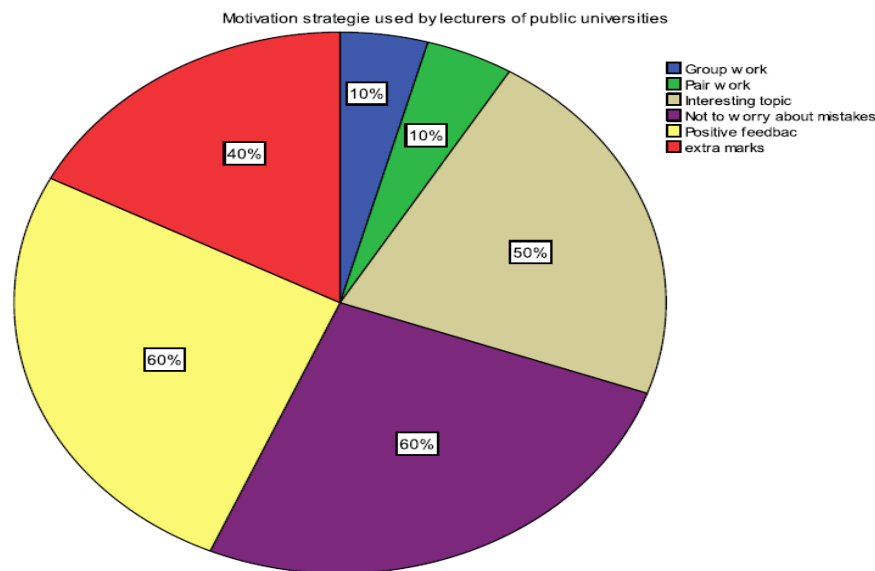


FIGURE 1
MOTIVATION STRATEGIES AT SYRIAN STATE UNIVERSITIES

By contrast, responses of the Syrian lecturers at private universities revealed that they motivated students to make predictions in different ways such as, looking at titles, introductions, illustrations or conclusion. The variety in the methodology used for making predictions in private universities could be indicative of the idea that lecturers at Syrian private universities were not

restricted by time and were more flexible regarding varying their teaching techniques for motivating their students.

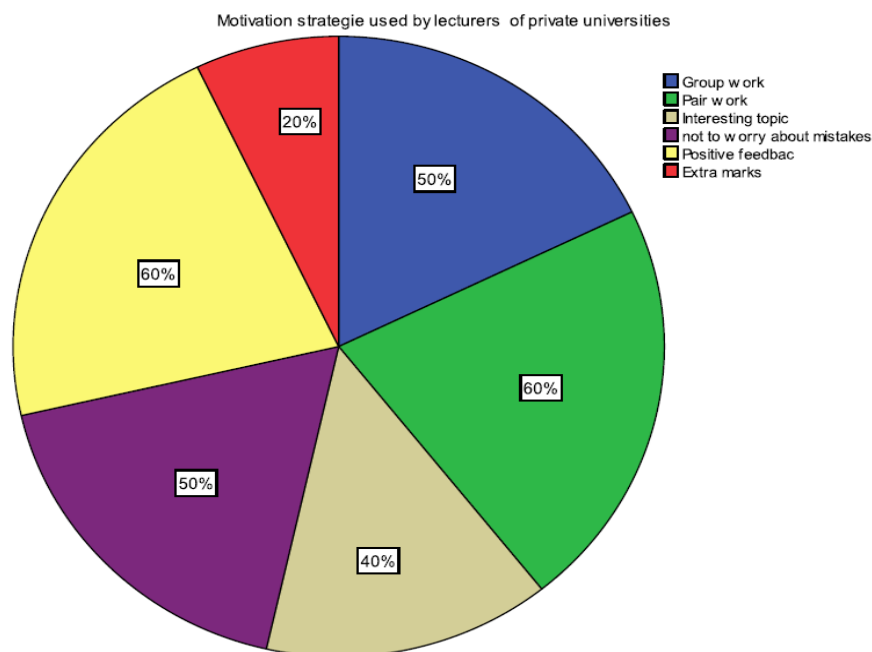


FIGURE 2
MOTIVATION STRATEGIES AT SYRIAN PRIVATE UNIVERSITIES

In addition, the pies Figures 1 & 2 shows that the majority of lecturers (60%) from Syrian state and private universities adopted offering positive feedback to increase students' motivation. That could be because they appreciated the role the positive feedback plays in the language learning process; it was a kind of reinforcement of students' reading efforts. As pointed out by Wong & Waring (2009), this positive reinforcement will lead students to improve their reading skills further. By contrast, minority of lecturers at state universities did not offer positive feedback as they might not have enough teaching experience or because they were not aware of the important role positive feedback plays in motivating and enhancing students' reading performance.

It is worth mentioning that Figure 1 shows that 40% of lecturers at state universities intended to offer extra marks for students' good performance. The main reason behind that could be the one indicated by lecturer B: *"With a great number of students as that of state university students, it would be highly motivating to offer extra marks to motivate students and increase their participation, especially when other strategies were not useful"*.

However, it seemed that with limited number of students, lecturers at private universities were not in need to adopt this strategy as students would be encouraged through other effective strategies such as, pair work or group work.

In addition, analyzing responses of lecturers at state universities indicated that majority of lecturers (70% at state universities and 90% at private universities) strongly agreed that the inclusion of socio-cultural materials of the target language could increase students' motivation and understanding at the same time. It seemed that these lecturers were aware of the positive

influence of activating cultural knowledge on students' reading, understanding where culture and language are inseparable. As indicated by many researchers, the key to successful reading is to provide students with meaningful contexts for language use by introducing different cultural information of the target language, and by using culturally authentic texts (Hudson, 2009; Washtell, 2015).

Many lecturers at private universities adopted group and pair works as motivation techniques: 50% for group work and 60% for pair work. It seemed that with limited number of students (may be no more than 40 students) pair and group works could be more effective; these activities would encourage learners to make use of what they had read, increase their confidence and make them work in meaningful interactions with each other. As indicated by Harmer (2001) and Barkley (2007), students' reading skills thrive in educational contexts in which they feel supported and cared for.

Surprisingly, Figure 2 also displays that few lecturers at private universities (40%) were concerned with teaching interesting materials. This might be attributed to their focus on other motivation strategies such as pair work, group work and offering positive feedback. They might find the previous activities more motivating for their students with a limited number. It could be that lecturers at private universities were more concerned with improving students reading skills rather than focusing on motivation techniques

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In this study, the researchers focused on students' motivation at Syrian state universities. The uniqueness of the present research is derived from its originality and novelty in the field. The literature showed that there was a considerable research on this topic in different contexts, but not in the Syrian one. By answering the research questions, lecturers at state universities in particular and lecturers in general will be aware of the challenges they face in motivating students and will have the opportunity to improve their methods. Also, this research will hopefully open the door for future works in this field. This paper presented the theoretical background of the research by reviewing different studies on motivation. Analyzing the interviews and questionnaires revealed that most lecturers at state universities were aware of the importance of motivating their students to increase their participation and improve their reading skills. They most often depended on motivation techniques that many not be time-consuming and do not require careful classroom management such as offering positive feedback, extra marks and choosing interesting texts. While in private universities they adopted different motivation strategies regardless of time management and other constraints; these are represented by pair work, group work, offering positive feedback and so on.

Based on the above-mentioned findings, the researchers spotlight on several conclusions and suggestions such reducing students' numbers when possible in classrooms and reducing the restricted reliance on coursebooks will lead to increased level of students' motivation and as a result an effective involvement of students in the classrooms. Thus, it is pivotal to give lecturers the chance to enjoy a sense of freedom to focus on a quality rather than quantity of education which will eventually lead to very positive students' outcomes. Any future research will greatly benefit from classroom observations and probably conduction some interviews with students themselves for their views on motivation.

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