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### **English Language Fun Activities to Motivate Low Proficiency Students**

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#### **ABSTRACT**

The present study evaluated the effects of fun English language activities conducted by the Language Centre at the National Defence University of Malaysia for low proficiency students. The annual Language Camp is planned carefully using student-centred activities outside the traditional classrooms with the hope to nurture students' interest and motivate them to improve their English language proficiency. Students' motivation was assessed through an adapted motivation scale where the questionnaire consists of motivational factors of Value, Language Requirement, Heritage, Expectancy, Competitiveness, Cooperativeness, and Motivational Strength. Students also expressed what motivate them in short answers. The two types of motivation identified from students' responses are: intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. Results showed that the activities conducted were found to be motivating; with "Treasure Hunt" as the most motivating and "Group Performance" as the least motivating activity. Thematic analysis done manually on short answers revealed that students were more extrinsically than intrinsically motivated. The goal of this study is not only to assess how successful the activities are but also to stress that such activities should be supported and continued as the benefits are tenfold. The activities conducted at the camp should be extended into the classroom and, the development and progress of students continuously monitored. Interesting and fun activities which heighten intrinsic motivation such as cross border communication e.g. Skype conference call with students from foreign universities should be experimented. At the same time demotivating root causes of learning English should be explored so that solutions to the causes can be proposed and executed.

*Keywords:* Students' Motivation, Fun Activities, English Language Proficiency, Language Camp

#### **Introduction**

There have been accusations that universities have failed to respond to the changing needs of graduates (D'Souza, 1991). Faculties and academic planners need information that will provide evidence of programme effectiveness, point to needed changes in course competencies and suggest strategies for improving programme quality (Heverly-Fitt, 2011). Approaches such as problem-based learning, portfolios and capstone courses as flexible continuous quality improvement (CQI) activities, have been conducted to enhance relationships between students and institutional characteristics, students' experiences in- and out-of-class, and students' learning outcomes across courses and faculties. Together with advancement in technology, teaching and learning in the classroom have gone electronic (e-learning or online learning); where classroom activities

vary from blended learning to flipped classrooms; but yet for the English language, there are still many students who are still not proficient.

The inability to be proficient in the language of knowledge has demotivated students as language competency is an essential element of successful academic excellence and is a dynamic process subject to continuous flux (Dörnyei, 2001). Motivation is one of the important factors to successful language learning where students who are most motivated to learn and excel in classroom activities tend to be the highest achievers (Gottfried, 1990; Schiefele, Krapp, & Winteler, 1992; Walberg & Uguroglu, 1980). Williams and Burden (1997) suggested that motivation is influenced by both external factors related to the socio-cultural and contextual background of the student's and internal factors related to the individual students. Internal factors include the student's attitudes towards the activity, his intrinsic interest, and the perceived relevance and value of the activity. Three psychological needs have to be met in order to enhance motivation according to Noels (2001) are: (1) a sense of competency achieved through seeking out and overcoming challenges; (2) autonomy; and (3) relatedness- being connected to an esteemed by others belonging to a larger social whole; and students need to have a sense of urgency and feelings of mastery and control over their learning and interest (Noels, 2001); sense of self-worth and self-determination (Old Father & West, 1999); and personal causation, interest, and enjoyment (Richards, 1993).

Have we failed to motivate our students and make them language competent? Do they need to learn or be motivated using the more traditional/conventional ways, as how we were taught during our days, without electronic gadgets, internet or wifi? According to Kleywegt (2013), to motivate students to be engaged with language learning, teachers should vary lesson activities and take into account different teaching and learning styles; and provide students with the opportunity to develop creativity and independence in their language learning. Additionally, Deng (2015) posited that it is vital for teachers to effectively organise student-centred activities and make them lively and vivid where students are seen as the main body in meeting their learning needs and developing their ability to use language. At the National Defence University, the Language Centre tries its best to motivate and accommodate students' differences in their learning of the English language. This study involves identification of students who need help, offering them help and, monitoring their progress and achievement. These processes are taken in response to the continuing demands for educational accountability, and to satisfy a natural curiosity about students' learning. Over time, it is intended that the procedures described here will continue to improve by involving other faculties and getting continuous feedback from students.

### **Intrinsic and Extrinsic Motivation**

There are studies on motivation that consider the highly complex situation of English in the extent to which psychological needs are being met and the ambiguous role of English in a post-colonial society such as in Hong Kong and Malaysia. Both Bolton and Luke (1999) and Lin (1996) suggested that English plays a negligible role in students' lives outside a formal learning environment in Hong Kong since motivation to use and learn English has been predominantly driven by extrinsic desires for vocational or socioeconomic advancement. This is found to be similar in Malaysia where students were found to be more extrinsically motivated (Ainol Madziah & Isarji, 2009; Bidin et al., 2009). Some of the major reasons or extrinsic motivations suggested by students for learning English include improving their job opportunities or studying in tertiary institutions in Hong Kong or abroad (Fan, 1999; Hoosain, 2005; Lin & Detaramani, 1998).

Intrinsic motivation is defined as performing an action or behaviour because one enjoys doing the action where he takes the action as a hobby (One is motivated to learn a language because it is personally rewarding rather than the desire for some external rewards such as learning the English language because it is fun, interesting and exciting). Intrinsic motivation is when there is no external incentive for doing any action; only personal satisfaction derived through self-initiated achievement. Intrinsic motivation is usually self-applied, and springs from a direct relationship between the individual and situation. Intrinsic motivation is a response to needs that exist within the learner, such as curiosity, the need to know, and feelings of competence or growth (Paul Eggen & Don Kauchak, 1994, P.428). Their purpose of learning is also the enjoyment of the learning process not for praise or rewards. Students with intrinsic motivation orientation study English on their own initiative and tend to prefer moderately challenging tasks. This has a great value and importance in learning, for the inward interest makes them self-starting and self-perpetuating and can keep the motivational machinery going for a long time.

On the other hand, extrinsic motivation refers to performing an action or behaviour in order to receive some external rewards or outcomes (One is motivated to learn the language in order to earn a reward (or avoid a punishment) such as getting good grades). It refers to the tendency to perform activities for known external rewards, whether they be tangible (e.g., money) or psychological (e.g., praise) in nature (Brown, 2007).

### **Materials and Methods**

The study shares the fun activities conducted by the Language Centre, NDUM in overcoming low English language proficiency amongst students. When students start their programmes; they have to sit for an English proficiency test, prepared by the centre. The names of students who scored badly for this test will be in the list of participants for an English Language Camp, held yearly at a military camp, which is located far from civilisation, and there is weak or no internet access. During the language camp, students are exposed to specially tailored student-centred activities to motivate students in learning the language. All 93 students were given the adapted questionnaire at the end of the language camp. At the end of the semester, students sit for their English language examination (Academic Writing or Oral Communication in English). The marks for both assessments are compiled and compared to monitor students' achievement and be aware of students who are still having problems in their language learning.

Students' motivation was assessed through an adapted motivation scale by Schmidt and Watanabe (2001). Items in the questionnaire consisted of motivational factors of: Value (belief that studying the language is worthwhile for a wide variety of reasons), Language Requirement, Heritage (concerning the students' attachment to the language as part of their own identity and cultural heritage), Expectancy (a combination of self-confidence, self-assessed aptitude for language learning, and lack of anxiety concerning a student's belief that he/she will do well and receive a good grade in the course), Competitiveness (about doing better than other students and getting good grades), Cooperativeness (concerning relationships with other students and the teacher and learning in a cooperative environment), and Motivational Strength (concerning one's intention to put one's best effort into learning the language, keep up with the course). The number of questions according to the factors varies with Value (14), Language Requirement (1), Heritage (3), Expectancy (9), Competitiveness (3), Cooperativeness (3), and Motivational Strength (3); with a total of 36 questions. The CQI activities conducted at the camp are: Ice Breaking Activity (A1), Newspaper in Education (A2), Chain Writing (A3), Grammar Activity (A4), Treasure Hunt (A5), and Group Performance (A6).

Students circle the numbers in the adapted scale on their agreement to statements given with 5=Strongly agree to 1=Strongly disagree. Apart from that, students rated the activity which motivated them the most, and in addition, they also wrote a brief paragraph on what motivates them most in learning the English language.

## Results and Discussion

### Students' Demographic Data

There are 52.7% male and 47.3% female respondents. All of them are Malay. 14.0% are from the Engineering Faculty, 7.5 % are from the Computer Science Faculty, 44.1% from Management and the remaining 34.3% are from the Language Centre. For Malaysia's standardised exam, the *Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia* (SPM) English language result, most of the respondents scored B (44.1%), while 32.2% scored A, 22.6% scored C, and 1.1% scored D. For the Malaysian University English Test (MUET), most of the respondents got Band 2 (74.2%), while 22.6% got Band 3, and only 3.2% got Band 1. These respondents are also doing foreign language courses with majority of them doing French (48.4%), 18.3% doing both Arabic and Mandarin, 10.8% doing Spanish, and 4.3% doing Russian. It can be seen that respondents did fairly well for standardised English language exams such as SPM and MUET.

### Students' Preference to Activities

Students' preference on the activities conducted was analysed using mean scores.

Table 1

*Students' Preference of Activities During Language Camp*

	Ice Breaking (A1)	NIE (A2)	Chain Writing (A3)	Grammar Act. (A4)	Treasure Hunt (A5)	Group Perf. (A6)
Mean	4.24	4.32	4.34	4.22	4.35	4.16
N	93	93	93	93	93	93
Std. Deviation	.772	.678	.730	.720	.761	.900

Out of the six activities, students preferred Treasure Hunt most (4.35), followed by Chain Writing (4.34), Newspaper in Education (4.32), Ice breaking activity (4.24), Grammar Activity (4.22), and they least preferred Group Performance (4.16). It is not surprising that Treasure Hunt appeared as their favourite activity, as it can be seen that the students were energetic running around the camp, cooperating and communicating with each other to find and solve a series of clues at hidden locations.

### Students' Motivation According to Motivational Factors

Students' motivation was analysed using the mean scores of motivation factors.

Table 2

*Mean Scores of Motivational Factors*

	Value	Lang. Req.	Heritage	Expect.	Compet.	Cooper.	Motiv. Strength
Mean	4.0399	3.9785	3.5066	3.9176	4.0860	3.8387	3.3978
N	93	93	93	93	93	93	93
SD	.49166	.59751	.58370	.65507	.61366	.57863	.99061

The highest mean score is for Competitiveness (4.0860), followed by Value (4.0399), Language Requirement (3.9785), Expectancy (3.9176), Cooperativeness (3.8387), Heritage (3.5066) and lowest is Motivational Strength (3.3978). If there is a sense of competitiveness in the activity conducted, students will be motivated in English language learning. This suggests that activities such as games and quizzes conducted in groups definitely motivate students.

### Correlation between Activities and Students' Motivation

A general hypothesis that describes the correlations between the activities conducted and students' motivation in learning the English language is: There is positive significant correlation between the activities conducted and students' motivation in learning the English language.

Table 3

*Correlation between Activities and Motivational Factors*

	Activity/ Correlation	Value	Lang. Req.	Heritage	Expect.	Compet.	Cooper.	Motiv. Strength
1	P Correlation	0.378**	.103	.247**	.232**	.254**	.408**	.241**
	Sig. 2-tailed)	.000	.326	.017	.025	.014	.000	.020
	N	93	93	93	93	93	93	93
2	P Correlation	.215**	.033	.062	.056	.093	.107	.088
	Sig. 2-tailed)	.039	.751	.555	.597	.375	.309	.402
	N	93	93	93	93	93	93	93
3	P Correlation	.333**	.200	.283**	.363**	.303**	.313**	.296**
	Sig. 2-tailed)	.001	.055	.006	.000	.003	.002	.004
	N	93	93	93	93	93	93	93
4	P Correlation	.342**	.184	.238*	.272**	.238*	.310**	.128
	Sig. 2-tailed)	.001	.078	.021	.008	.022	.002	.223
	N	93	93	93	93	93	93	93
5	P Correlation	.377**	.142	.399**	.265**	.219**	.252**	.238**
	Sig. 2-tailed)	.000	.174	.000	.010	.035	.015	.021
	N	93	93	93	93	93	93	93
6	P Correlation	.168	.134	.020	.167	.189	.152	.085
	Sig. 2-tailed)	.108	.199	.849	.110	.070	.147	.417
	N	93	93	93	93	93	93	93

The correlations between the preferences of activities and specific motivational factors show strong influence of Activities A1, A3, A5, A4 and A2. For all seven motivational factors, Activity A1 correlates with all the motivational factors except for Language Requirements. Activity A1 significantly correlates with Cooperativeness most (0.408) and Expectancy least (0.232). Activity A2 is only significantly influencing the Value factor of students' motivation. Next, Activity A3 correlates significantly with all the motivational factors except for Language Requirements. Activity A3 significantly correlates with Expectancy most (0.363) and Heritage least (0.283). Additionally, Activity A4 correlates significantly with all the motivational factors except for Language Requirements. Activity A4 significantly correlates with Value most (0.342) and, Heritage (0.238) and Competitiveness (0.238) least. Activity A5 correlates significantly with all the motivational factors except for Language Requirements. Activity A5 significantly correlates with Heritage most (0.399) and Competitiveness (0.219) least.

As can be seen in Table 3, most of the activities significantly correlate with the motivational factors, except for A6. There are no significant correlations between A6 and all seven motivational factors. Group Performance does not correlate in any way with the

seven motivational factors. A possible reason why Group Performance or Short Drama is not in favour is because only selected few get the roles, acting in public raises anxiety, to play a character needs skills and being shy does not help. In addition, all the six activities do not correlate significantly with the factor Language Requirement. The language requirements, to do all tasks depend on the activities and students' capabilities. Students' motivational factor of language requirements was not significantly increased (all positive values) by the activities.

### **How are Students Motivated in Learning the English Language?**

To answer this, students wrote what motivates them to learn the English language. 74 out of 91 respondents (82%) answered this question. Responses were read carefully and, classified as either intrinsic or extrinsic motivation. Some responses denoted both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. 77.6% of responses showed extrinsic motivation, while 22.4% intrinsic motivation.

An example of a student's response that shows the student is motivated extrinsically:

"I learn the English language because it is one of the important languages to learn. For example, if I want to *apply for a job*, I must speak in English. And *during the interview*, I have to speak fluently; which will make *communication easier* with one another, especially with the other races"

An example of a student's response that shows the student is motivated intrinsically:

"I am motivated to learn the English language because, first, it is a modern language in a globalised era; a first language or international language used by many. *Besides, I find it an interesting language to learn* as the structure of the sentence is broken into many parts such as verb, noun, adjective, adverb, phrases, idioms and many more. *I can learn the language part by part and this makes it easier for me to understand*. Last but not least, the lectures for English language are not complex as compared to other subjects and the English lecturers are open-minded and ever willing to share their knowledge"

Students are more extrinsically than intrinsically motivated. Teachers should plan their activities well so that they encourage intrinsic motivation in students. The activities carried out should inspire students so that they are willing to learn new knowledge for the purpose of satisfying their curiosity, they have the need to know and feeling of competence and growth or progress in learning the English language. Intrinsic motivation should be developed because it allows students to become life-long learners.

### **Conclusion**

Motivation plays a significant role in the process of learning a language. The study proves that English language CQI learning activities should not be restricted only in the classrooms and the planned student centred activities outside the classrooms have motivated students. Students were found to prefer group activities that encourage cooperativeness where they are free to move around, communicate and work together to solve tasks. Students are motivated best when teaching and learning are carried out in less anxious situations, and they are given the trust and empowerment to carry out the tasks given to them. Hence, encouraging students to take greater responsibility in their own learning process is essential to enhance motivation. The study also revealed that students lacked intrinsic motivation. Intrinsic motivation should be nurtured because students who are intrinsically motivated will end up truly developed, challenged, and ultimately fulfilled by their life experiences. Without sufficient motivation, students will not be able to acquire or be proficient in a language.

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