

Motivating teenagers

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"Motivation is as much an effect as a cause of learning." Ausubel

In this article I will discuss how teachers can aim to improve the motivation levels of teenage students. I will link three practical classroom activities to the ideas of American Psychologist Carl Rogers.

The ideas of Carl Rogers

Rogers (1957) outlined 3 attitudinal qualities that a teacher, or in his words, a facilitator, should have to assist the learning process. They are empathy (seeing things from the students' view point), authenticity (being yourself) and acceptance (of students' ideas and opinions).

Types of motivation and teenagers

It is widely agreed that motivation has a great effect on a student's capacity to learn. Motivation can be broken down into extrinsic and intrinsic forms. Intrinsic motivation comes from within the learner, who wants to learn for the sake of learning. Although not impossible to find an intrinsically motivated teenage student, five years of experience working with Young Learners in Spain leads me to believe that they are few and far between! It is much more likely that our teenage students will be extrinsically motivated, meaning that their motivation comes from external sources such as wanting to pass an exam or please their parents. The good news for teachers of teenagers is that there are many things we can do in the classroom to increase the levels of extrinsic motivation.

Ways to improve motivation

- *Journals - Empathy*
Journal writing can create wonderful opportunities to find out more about your students' lives. When introducing the idea of writing journals it is important to make the aims and general rules clear to students.

Students should each have their own notebook to use as their journal. These should be kept by the teacher and it should be made clear that the teacher will not read anyone's writing out in the class. It will be strictly a two-way 'conversation' between the individual student and the teacher. At the end of the course I always give the students their journals to keep.

It should be made clear that the idea is to communicate effectively in English and not to worry too much about mistakes. The teacher will not correct mistakes and will focus solely on the meaning. I always keep a list of common mistakes that are made in the journals and deal with them as and when it is appropriate as an integrative part of the course. I would never use a sentence lifted directly from a journal to focus on an error.

Class time should be set aside for journal writing. At the start of a course, I ask students to begin their journals by telling me about themselves and their reasons for studying English. The teacher collects all the journals in and replies individually to each one and asks a question or two, which will be the prompts for the next class's journal writing.

Although replying to the writing in the journals can be time consuming it really does help the teacher to empathise with the students. Discovering, for example, that the reason one of my students didn't like to sing in class was because his voice was breaking, or that one of the students was having problems with a group of friends at school really helps to remind us of what it is like to be a teenager! I am sure these students would not have seen it as appropriate to come and talk to me about these issues but they did feel comfortable to write about them. Many students have really enjoyed the process of journal writing and have felt motivated to write in English on a regular basis.

- *Using photos - Authenticity*

Teenage students can be very curious and inquisitive. Given half the chance they want to know more about you and your life outside the classroom. It is a personal decision how much of yourself you want to give away and share with your students. I have always found that personalising really helps to increase students' interest levels. Carl Rogers claimed that learning would be much more effective when the facilitator does not hide behind a façade.

Using photos can really help to spark genuine interest and generate a lot of language. Topics that lend themselves to the use of photos are describing people, family, holidays or describing places. How much more interesting to describe a photo of the teacher's friend or sister than to describe a photo of a random unknown man in a book? How much more engaging to see holiday photos from the teacher's summer break rather than the typical desert island shots used in course books? Grammar lessons can also be supported with photos. To give a simple example, teaching 'used to' becomes much more memorable when sentences with a visual image can be formed. Eg. "my teacher used to have long hair and a moustache"

Of course there can be drawbacks with letting the students into your personal life, and you should think carefully about who to 'introduce' your class to! Teenagers have excellent memories, so questions about the people in the photos will last for the whole course, sometimes the relationships may not last quite as long!

- *Music - Acceptance*

Teenagers love listening to music! A sweeping generalisation, but on the whole I have found it to be true. Due to the fact that so much popular music is in English it can be a source for highly motivating activities.

Although it can be tempting to only use music in the class that you enjoy listening to, teenagers really appreciate it if you make the effort to find out what they like listening to. To get this information students can write surveys to

do with the class to find out the top five favourite bands. When you know what they like to listen to encourage students to lend you the CDs or tapes. I often record music videos from a local TV channel.

Most teachers have a variety of activities to use with songs. Lyrics can be easily found on the internet and there are many opportunities to exploit language in songs. Students themselves can be involved in creating activities to use with their favourite songs.

Having music on in the background can really change the atmosphere of a classroom. When students are working in groups I sometimes like to have music playing softly in the class. Rather than always play my own tastes I allow students to bring in their own tapes. A class vote decides what we listen to when we work. By accepting their music tastes and 'tuning in' to them, the motivation levels of a class can be improved. Teenagers know a lot about music and will be willing to tell you all about it. Rather than ignoring the differences in taste between them and you, exploit them and use them as a real information gap!